

# JEEVADHARA

*A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION*

## APPROACHES TO SUFFERING IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

THE MISSION OF THE 'EBED YAHWEH  
AND HIS VICARIOUS SUFFERING

*Abraham Pezhumkattil*

AGONY AND ANGUISH:  
THE PSALMIST IN HIS SUFFERINGS

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INDIVIDUAL LAMENTS IN HEBREW POETRY;  
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DISCIPLESHIP AND SUFFERING IN  
THE GOSPEL OF MARK

*Paul S. Pudussery*

'WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG' (2 COR 12:10);  
PAULINE UNDERSTANDING OF APOSTOLIC SUFFERINGS

*J. M. Pathrapankal*

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**JEEVADHARA**

# **The Word of God**

**APPROACHES TO SUFFERING IN THE  
BIBLICAL TRADITION**

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## Editorial

The Gospel of John narrates a very challenging story towards the conclusion of the Book of Signs (Chs 1-12) in preparation for the Book of Glory (Chs 13-20). It is the story of some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for the feast, going in search of Jesus (Jn 12:20-26). The situation was a delicate one, because the Jews as such would not welcome the Gentiles. So they went to Philip for getting introduced to Jesus. Philip went and consulted Andrew and both of them approached Jesus. The reaction of Jesus was very spontaneous and surprising. He said: 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped in the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains. Whoever loves his own life will lose it; whoever hates his own life in this world will keep it for life eternal' (Jn 12:23-25).

The thrust of the story seems to be Jesus' effort to transcend his Jewish identity through his death in such a way that he could cease to be a Jew and begin to be the 'Man for others'. The general Johannine approach to the passion and suffering of Jesus as the beginning of his glorification also calls for this interpretation. Jesus saw his Jewish identity as a hindrance to his universal availability. Hence he was glad about the hour when he will cease to be a slave of his Jewish identity and grow into that universal humanhood, where every human being can approach him and relate himself to him. Though this process implies suffering and death, it is understood as a process of glorification. It is a process of the Son of Man 'being lifted up

from the earth, by which he could draw everyone to himself' (cf. Jn 12:32). It is a process of Jesus 'hating his own life in this world' by which he could 'keep it for life eternal' (Jn 12:25b). Here we see a new approach to the reality of suffering, a new way of looking at one's own identity in the context of one's mission among others.

A very interesting aspect of this story is that Jesus takes the example for this illustration from nature, in such a way that dying and losing for the sake of rising and gaining are part and parcel of the very law of nature. Only if a grain of wheat opts for death, can it give rise to a plant on which hundreds of grains can grow. Jesus took up this law of nature to illustrate his own feelings in the face of a predicament which made him think like the grain that did not die. His being a Jew was an obstacle to his becoming available to the Greeks. So he rejoices over the moment when he would die and cease to be a Jew. During his earthly ministry he was trying to make his religion transcend its own legalism and myopia. He would challenge the meaninglessness of many of the Jewish customs and practices. At last he surrendered himself and thereby transcended Judaism to become the 'Man for all'

This is one of the most powerful insights of the Bible about the reality of suffering, a theme chosen for the present issue of *Jeevadhara*. The Bible is a library of its own and in it we have authors of its different books presenting their own approach and understanding of the reality of suffering. Since it is a phenomenon that has been baffling human understanding ever since it became a reality in human history, many attempts have been made not only to remove it from human life but also to understand its origin and purpose. Starting with the Book of Genesis, we have the Yahwist writer presenting the origin of suffering in the context of the sin of the world. The Psalmists have their own approach to the problem of suffering. The author of the Book of Job tries to understand the mystery of the sufferings of the innocent and reaches nowhere to give a



solution. The New Testament is very much concerned with this problem and we have the Gospels as the concrete illustration of a theology of suffering centred on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

In this issue of *Jeevadhara* the various studies are presented with a view to analysing the problematics of suffering. Abraham Pezhumkattil attempts to study the mission of the 'Ebed Yahweh as it evolves in the Old Testament as one who takes upon himself the guilt of the people and suffers for their sake in order to make them acceptable to God and redeem them. Raja Rao in his study 'Agony and Anguish: The Psalmist in his sufferings' tries to understand the Psalms of sufferings from the perspective of the Psalmist's experience and feeling whereby those Psalms become very much personal. Onunwa Udobata studies the 'Individual laments in Hebrew Poetry' and his is an attempt to analyse the Psalms of Lament showing how through such prayers the Psalmist expressed his faith and trust in God. John Kallikuzhuppil studies the attitude of Jesus to the reality of suffering from a double perspective: Jesus' attitude to his own sufferings and his attitude to the sufferings of others. Whereas he tried his best to alleviate the sufferings of others, he himself underwent crucial sufferings and thereby emerged as one who conquered sufferings. Paul S. Pudussery analyses the concept of discipleship in Mark in the context of his theology of suffering in view of glorification. Written for the persecuted Christians of Rome during the first century, the message of this teaching is still relevant for disciples of Jesus all over the world. Joseph Pathrapanka<sub>1</sub> concludes the studies with an analysis of the apostolic sufferings of Paul from the perspective of the specific

role played by him in the early Church. For him sufferings were the context in which he could exercise his decisive role to make the Church what it was to become as willed and planned by Christ.

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## The Mission of the 'Ebed Yahweh and his Vicarious Suffering

There are some 68 references in the Old Testament to an 'ebed of whom Yahweh speaks as "my servant" (66 times *'abdi*; 2 times *ebed li*). 92 times some particular individuals refer themselves as "your servant" (*'abdkā*). The use of "his servant" (*'abdō*) in the third person appears 23 times; and the designation 'servant of the Lord' (*'ebed YHWH*) 21 times. Rarely (4 times) appears also the title 'servant of God' (*'ebed hā'ēlōhim*).

The title *'ebed YHWH* in the singular is used to designate Israel or some specially distinguished men in the Old Testament history, namely, Abraham, Moses and others. But there are some texts in the Book of Second Isaiah where an identification of this person is impossible; and there are some references in the Book of Psalms to a pious individual who designates himself as the 'servant of the Lord'.

### Referring to some particular persons

The following texts, where the expression 'my servant' appears, show certain similarity with regard to the image of the Lord's servant.

Gen 26:24: 'I am the God of Abraham your father; fear not, I am with you. I will bless you, multiply your descendants for the sake of Abraham my servant.'

Num 12:7-8: '...my servant Moses, he is entrusted with all my house ..., He beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?'

Num 14:24: 'My servant Caleb, he has a different spirit; he has followed me fully. I will bring him to the land; his descendants shall possess it.'

2 Sam 3:18: 'My servant David, by his hand I will save my people...from the hand of all their enemies.'

2 Sam 7:8-10: 'My servant David, I took you from the pasture ...to be prince over my people Israel; I have been with you...I have cut your enemies; I will make for you a great name; I will appoint a place for my people Israel.'

Is 20:20-24: 'I will call my servant Eliakim; I will commit authority to his hand; he shall be father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; they shall hang on him the whole weight of his father's house' (see also 2 King 19:34; 20:6; Ps 89:3-4; Is 37:5; Ez 34:23f).

In all these cases the servant of the Lord is someone who has great influence before God. He is one who follows Yahweh fully and faithfully. The Lord is with him and he walks always in God's presence. It is on him that the foundation, existence and salvation of his descendants and of the whole people depend. It is on account of the special mission of this servant that Yahweh saves His people and establishes it. In the case of Eliakim (Is 20:20-24) and of Moses (Num 12:7-8) there is mention of suffering that accompany this mission.

The reason why someone becomes Yahweh's servant is that he is loved and selected by the Lord (1 King 11:34; Hag 2:23; Ps 89:3.20). This implies also a promise of help and protection. But the promise of help and protection is especially extended to the people of God rather than to the individual designated by the title 'servant of the Lord'. With regard to the above mentioned texts, the help from God to the people takes place on account of the chosen servant.

### Israel-Jacob as the Servant of the Lord

There are some texts that describe the people of

God as the 'ebed YHWH, and that extend promise to the same:

Jer 30:10: 'O Jacob, my servant, do not fear; O Israel be not dismayed; I will save you from afar and your offspring from the land of captivity.'

Is 41:8.10: 'Israel, you are my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, Abraham's offspring, my friend. I took you from the ends of the earth, called from its farthest corners saying: you are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off. Fear not I am with you; be not dismayed, I am your God, I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you.'

Is 44:1-2: 'Jacob, my servant, Israel whom I have chosen, I made you; I formed you from the womb. I will help you, fear not Jacob, my servant, (Jeshurun) whom I have chosen... I will pour out my spirit upon your descendants and my blessing on your offspring.'

Ps 136: 22ff: 'He gave to Israel, His servant a heritage ... he remembered us in our low state ... rescued us from our foes...' Other texts are Is 43:10; 44:21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3 (doubtful).

Israel-Jacob is specially chosen by the Lord as his servant, just as in the case of the individual servants. The phrases and style used in narrating this selection are also similar to the former. But Israel-Jacob is not a people innocent, but one that deserves just chastisement and punishment (Jer 30: 11). Its captivity in foreign lands and afflictions from enemies are presented as effects of sin and unfaithfulness (Jer 30:12.15). But in the salvific acts of God towards the chosen servant Israel, Yahweh wants to show that his covenant relationship to the people is always faithful and valid. As it is evident that the covenant has been established through the beloved and chosen servants of the Lord, Abraham, Moses and David, so it is for the sake of these eminent individuals that the Lord remembers his covenant to his people and considers them as his servant.



### The anonymous Servant of the Lord

Now our attention turns towards a special group of passages that speak of an anonymous *'ebed YHWH*. They include the four famous texts from the Book of Second Isaiah, which are generally known as the *'ebed YHWH* songs, and some references in the Book of Psalms to a similar *'ebed YHWH* figure.

Is 42:1: "Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my heart delights. I have put my spirit upon him... 6: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you..."

Is 49:1: "...the Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name... 3: He said to me: you are my servant, (Israel, in whom I will be glorified)... 4: I said: surely my right is with the Lord and my recompense with my God. 5: He formed me from the womb, to be his servant; to bring back Jacob to him... 7: ...the Lord is faithful, the Holy one of Israel, who has chosen you."

Is 50:4: 'The Lord has given me a tongue of those who are taught to sustain the weary; 7: The Lord helps me; I have not been confounded, I shall not be put to shame, he who vindicates me is near ... 9: The Lord helps me; who will declare me guilty?'

Is 52:13: 'My servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.'

53:11: 'He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and shall bear their iniquities.'

Among the four *'ebed YHWH* songs, sometimes there is doubt with regard to Is 49:1-6 and 50:4-9 in determining whether the person is a particular individual or whether he represents the people of Israel. The indication of Israel in 49:3 and the similarity of 50:4-9 to 43:9-13 support this doubt. The general outline in which the unknown servant is presented goes in conformity with the presentation of the other individual servants and also the servant Israel-Jacob.

But what draws our special attention in these songs are the narration of the vicarious actions and sufferings that the servant endures for the sake of a larger group.

Is 42:1: '...he will bring forth justice to the nations; 2: he will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; 3: a dimly burning wick he will not quench, he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4: He will not burn dimly or be bruised till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law... 6: I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind to bring out prisoners from the dungeon...'

Is 49:1: 'Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken, you people from afar... 2: He makes my mouth like a sharp sword ... he made me a polished arrow ... 4: I said: I have laboured in vain: I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity. 6: The Lord says (v.7) (to the one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers): it is too light a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, to restore the preserved of Israel. I will give you as a covenant to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'

Is 50:5: 'The Lord has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward. 6: I gave my back to the smiters, and cheeks to those who pulled out the beard, I hid not my face from shame and spitting ... 7: I have set my face like a flint.'

The fourth servant song (52:13-53,12) is a long narration on the vicarious sufferings of the servant. It has four parts:

- a) 52:14-53,3: His sad and pitiable appearance: 'He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...'
- b) 53:4-6: He was punished for the iniquity of the community: 'He has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

- c) 53:7-10: Silent suffering and death: 'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth... He was stricken for the transgression of my people, and they made his grave with the wicked...'
- d) 53:10-12: The will of God to effect reconciliation through the servant of the Lord: 'He makes himself an offering for sin... he shall make many to be accounted righteous, and shall bear their iniquities.'

In all the four servant songs in Isaiah, it is an individual who assumes the role of an *'ebed YHWH* to act in the place of and to suffer for the sake of the people. With regard to the identification of the servant in Is 42:18-25 and 43:8-13 there exists obscurity. But the similarity of these texts with Is 42:1-7, gives ground to consider the servant appearing there also to be a particular individual.

Besides these, there are some psalms in which an individual is presented with the title *'ebed YHWH* (27:9; 31:17; 35:27; 69:11; 86:2,4,16; 109:28; 143:2,12). He is pictured as undertaking penitential acts (31:11-12; 35:12-14; 69:7-8, 11-12, 19-20; 109:22-25) and bearing afflictions from God (27:12; 69:9,26; 109:27; 143:2) and from enemies (27:11-12; 31:11-13, 19; 35:11, 15-16; 69:4, 12-21; 86:14; 109:25). None of these psalms depict the servant as a sinner; on the other hand he is one especially favoured by God (27:10; 31:14; 35:27; 69:16; 86:1-4; 143:5), falsely accused by deceitful men (27:12; 31:18; 35:7, 11, 19-20; 69:4; 86:14; 109:1,4). The fact that God punished the servant as if he were a sinner shows some greater motif from the part of God, namely, he allows the servant to assume suffering for God and for the sake of the people (35:13-14; 69:6-12, 26; 109:4,5).

The context in which the designation *'ebed YHWH* is used in the above mentioned psalms is the suffering of the person. It always appears in connection with a petition, and the request is always for the experience of God's love and salvific presence in his sufferings. It seems here that the *'ebed* is a person who is especially destined to suffer. But no one else recognizes this person as an *'ebed YHWH*, and his sufferings as part of his mission.



The recognition the servant desires in Ps 35:27 from others is an affirmation that takes place only after the completion of his afflictions.

## The tasks of the Servant of the Lord

The main tasks entrusted to the servant of the Lord are: 1) to bring forth justice to the nations (Is 42:1-4; 53:8), establish law (42:4) and righteousness (49:4; 53:11); 2) to bring back Jacob to the Lord, to gather Israel to him (49:5-6); 3) to become a light to the nations, a covenant to the people and salvation to Israel (42:7; 49:6). In fulfilling these tasks the servant functions as a representative of the community and takes up suffering for the sake of the community.

## Bringing forth justice and righteousness

The term *mispāt*, meaning justice or judgment, usually refers to a trial in a court of justice. It is often accompanied by *sēdeq* or *sedāqāh* (= righteousness) to signify that the establishment of right is the aim of taking a person to the court of law. The examples are: Num 27:5; Is 40:14-27; 41:1f; 42:1 3,4; 49:4; 50:8; 53:8; 54:17; Jer 51:9f; Ps 17:1f; 37:5f; 143:2; Job 22:4; 23:4-10. In all these cases it is Yahweh who has to bring forth righteousness to those who deserve it in a *mispāt* (Only in 2 Sam 15:4 does a human agent present himself as handling the *mispāt* and as rendering right to others; but it was injustice that he was doing). From the part of God it is the dismissal of the case and an opening of the way to proceed in the path of righteousness. Especially noteworthy is the expression *hōsi' sēdaqah* (= to bring forth righteousness) with Yahweh as its subject in Jer 51:9f, where it is presented as the opposite of filing a *mispāt* against Babylon. It is only in Is 42:1-3 that *hōsi' mispāt* appears. There the subject who brings forth the case is the servant; and the case is against the nations. The action of the servant resembles the action of Moses in Num 27:5, where Moses brings before the Lord the case of the daughters of Zelophead. The servant in the first song is the one who does the *mispāt* for the nations. Yahweh has appointed

him to be a covenant and light to the nations, so that he may bring forth righteousness (v.6). Therefore the servant here acts as a representative of Yahweh himself (v.1). It is for his law that they await (v.4).

But in Is 49:4 ('my right is with the Lord') and 50:8 'the one who makes me righteous is near; who will file a case against me'), it is the servant who stands to be judged. The same is the case in Ps 143:2. In Is 53:8 he is already in trial. This standing in trial is actually vicarious in the role of the servant. Through this he has to 'raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel'. The Lord sets him as 'a light to the nations' to establish salvation to the ends of the earth (49:6).

### **Representative character**

#### **1) Taking up the iniquity of others**

The role of the 'ebed YHWH is that of a representative appointed by God to take upon himself the guilt and punishment of the congregation. The special expressions employed in Is 53 to denote this function are: 'he has borne (*ns'*) our griefs' (v.4), 'carried (*sbl*) our sorrows' (v.4), 'he shall bear (*sbl*) their iniquities' (v.11) and 'he bore (*ns'*) the sin of many' (v.12). The phrase, 'to bear iniquities' (*ns'* 'awōn), is used in Ex 23:38; Lev 10:17 and Num 18:23 in connection with the representative action of the priest in taking on the iniquities of the congregation in order to enable the community to be relieved of the impending punishment and of the moral responsibility of the evils that they have committed. In Lev 16:20-22 the same function of the priest is done by the scape-goat that takes upon it the iniquities (*ns'* 'awon) of the congregation. But the goat does not have a representative character. Concerning the atonement for sin, it is the priest who functions as the mediator and representative. A similar use of the phrase is found in Ez 4:4-6, where the prophet is commanded to bear the punishment (*ns'* 'awon) of the House of Israel and of the House of Judah.

Unlike the case with regard to the priestly function, in Is 53 and Ez 4 we see an individual acting as a repre-

sentative. Two special characteristics accompany the role of these particular individuals: 1) a special commissioning by God to take up the iniquities of others, and 2) the aspect of suffering connected with the bearing of iniquities. The levitical rites prescribe the bearing of iniquities as a sacerdotal duty, which comes to completion in the sacrifice of an animal. In these texts, on the other hand, the specially commissioned persons themselves play the role of both the representing priest and the animal for sacrifice. If the commissioning of the priests was a general assignment of duty in the levitical order, here it is a particular and personal one, intended for a definite mission. The suffering connected with the functioning of the duty is not present in the role of the priests; the animals perform it there. But in Is 53 and Ez 4 the taking up of iniquities is closely linked to the suffering of the person acting as a representative of the community.

Going one step further, Jer 15:15 and Ps 69:7 present an individual who takes up (*ns*) suffering in the form of insult and disgrace for the sake of God.

Jer 15:15: 'O Lord, . . . know that for your sake I bear reproach (*'alākā ns*).'

Ps 69:7: 'It is for your sake that I have borne reproach (*'aleka ns*).'

What one can observe here, especially in the case of Jeremiah, is that the bearing of reproach results from a commissioning from God and that this mission accompanies suffering. Jeremiah speaks about this special mission when he makes mention of his receiving the word of God, and himself being called by the name of God (15:16). Jer 20:9 reinforces the idea of such a mission, where he speaks about the irresistible force of the word of God that works as a propelling power in his heart. In Jer 15:15-18 and 20:7-12 the aspect of suffering linked to the entrusted mission is clear. It was a mission that demanded a separation from the enjoyments of life (15:17) and caused insult and persecution from others (20:7-8). The unwillingness from his part and the compulsion of the Lord's word from inside



aggravated his sufferings (20: 9-10). This is the reason why the prophet explains his afflictions as an experience of God's indignation and as a bearing of insult on account of God. In Ps 69 also '*aleka* indirectly refers to a similar commissioning of the servant of the Lord for a special duty; the effect of the zeal of God and the insult and disgrace are the sufferings linked with this mission (Ps 69:7-10).

The aspect of mission and suffering, expressed in the phrase, 'for your sake I have borne reproach', further stresses the representative role of the servant on behalf of the people. He is given the duty of suffering for the people, because both in Jer 15:15 and in Ps 69:7 the implication is that it is on account of the relationship of the servant with God and the community that he is commissioned to witness to God through his sufferings.

## 2) Wounded and pierced for the sake of others

The servant of the Lord is presented as being smitten, wounded and pierced by God. Is 53:3-5 and Ps 69:26 say that the blow and wound come directly from God. The blow that the servant receives in Is 50:6 can be attributed indirectly to God.

The verb *nkh* (=to strike) is frequently used in the Old Testament, with God as its subject, to signify God's striking the sinful Israel and the inimical nations. In Lev 26:24 God himself says that he will strike sinful Israel. The verb *k'b* (=to wound) has the same nuance as that of *nkh*. The substantives *ke'ēb* and *mak'ōb* are often used to signify the suffering caused by a wound, but referring to an internal and spiritual wound. In many places the pain and the wound presuppose a previous punitive action by God.

But there are some texts that refer to innocent persons who are struck and wounded by God:

*struck*: Is 53:4; Jer 15:18; Ps 69:26

*wounded*: Is 53:3-4; Jer 15:18; 45:3; Ps 69:26-29.

All these texts agree in affirming that the cause for the suffering is not to be found in the sufferer, but in some cause outside of himself. To the observers, and even to

those for whom he is suffering, he appears as a sinner and as an evildoer. In Is 53 what we hear is a narration of the sufferings of the servant for the sins of others. In Jer 15: 15-18 also the pain of the prophet is caused by the sinfulness of Israel. In Ps 69 there is a strong affirmation on the servant's voluntary submission to suffering and to his willingness to take on the responsibility for the sake of the community. Moreover he presents himself as belonging to God even in his wounded state. In all the three contexts, the servant, being struck and wounded by God, on account of the sins of others, presents the image of a vicarious sufferer.

The verb to denote piercing is *hll*. Is 53:5 uses a passive form (*me'hālāl*) indicating God as the agent. But in Ps 69:26 the substantive *halal*, with the second person pronominal suffix, is used to mean that he is pierced for the sake of God. In the Old Testament the use of the substantive *halal* with a pronominal suffix has a special signification. It refers to the person who is pierced or wounded for the sake of someone else, whom the pronominal suffix represents: Judg 16:24; Is 34:2-3; Jer 51:47; Ez 6:4.5.13. In all these cases, the subject who inflicts the wound is either an enemy from outside or God who acts as an enemy, both to the slain and to the group to which the inflicted belongs. The wounded, in all such contexts, suffer as the representative of the group.

In Ps 69:26 also, according to the signification of *halalika* (your wounded), the person is wounded for the sake of God or the wounded belongs to God. The subject who inflicts the wound can be either God himself or the enemies. But on the basis of the parallelism between the couplets in v.26: 'whom you have smitten' and 'the pains of your wounded', the one who inflicts the servant can be understood as God himself. In such a context, *halaleka* assumes a double signification, namely, the wounded belongs to God and suffers for the sake of God; and at the same time: he is wounded by God for the sake of someone else. Both meanings manifest a representative character.

In Ps 109:22 the servant, in order to express his state

of suffering, says that 'his heart is stricken (*hll*) within him'. This signifies that the wound inflicted by the blow and piercing of God need not be considered as external or physical; these are all figurative terminology employed to describe the mental agony of someone who is punished by God.

### 3) Offering himself for the sins of others

As a culmination of the surrogate role taken up by the servant, Is 53:10 says that 'he makes himself an offering for sin (*'asam*)'. About the meaning of '*asam*' there is no definite and uniform opinion. The common view is that the verb '*sm*' is related to transgression and guilt, and that the substantives '*asam*' and '*asmah*' refer either to transgression and guilt or to offering and restitution for transgression and guilt.

The approach in Lev 4-5, where the notion of guilt and guilt offering is introduced, is to understand '*asam*' in a general sense as occurring from committing sin and by becoming impure by cultic uncleanness. But in other places '*asam*' is mostly related to the impurity of consecrated persons and the desecration of holy things (e.g. Num 6:9-12; Judg 21:22; 1 Chr 21:3; 2 Chr 28:13; Is 24:6; Ez 10:10-19). In some texts it is said that the sin committed by one person becomes an '*asam*' to others as well (Lev 4:3-13; 1 Chr 21:31; 2 Chr 19:10; 24:18; 28:10-13). This aspect of '*asam*' indicates nothing but a corporate responsibility of the community for the misdeed committed. It also speaks of the transferring of responsibility to another and the assuming of the responsibility by another. If the one who commits the guilty act is the leader of the group, the responsibility passes to the whole group. If it is the group as a whole or the individual members that commit the act, then the responsibility can be taken up by the leader of the group or by a select body from the group. The transferring and the assuming of the '*asam*' is manifest in the guilt offerings also. The person responsible lays his hands upon the head of the victim before it is immolated, as a sign of transferring the responsibility (Lev 4:4, 15, 24; 16:21-22).



The servant of the Lord, making himself an '*asam*.. is a representative offering himself for the sins of others. This is stated in Is 53:11-12: 'he shall bear their iniquities', 'he bore the sins of many'. In a similar manner can also be understood the statement of the Lord's servant in Ps 69:5: 'God you know my folly; my guilt ('*asmah*) is not hidden from you'. Here the folly and guilt stand parallel to the reproach, shame and dishonour, mentioned in v. 19: 'you know my reproach, my shame and dishonour'. Is:50:6 also refers to a similar situation of the sufferer:

'I gave my back to the smiters and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting.'

### Conclusion

The main intention of God in the call and mission of the servant is to forgive the sins of his people and to restore their fortune, by pouring out his wrath on his servant. The servant thus takes on himself the burden of the guilt of the people and suffers the pain of God's chastisement. In this aspect the vicarious role of the sufferer leads to substitution for God, by becoming an agent to pardon the sins, and for the sinners, by bearing their punishment.

The response of the servant to his mission, and his attitude towards his sufferings are in accord with the intentions of God. He feels himself being alienated and abandoned by God, attacked and afflicted by adversaries, ridiculed and calumniated by his fellow-men. The sufferer here is not a mere substitute, bearing the chastisement due to sinfulness; he is an innocent victim of expiation for the sins of others.

Abraham Pezhumkattil

# Agony and Anguish: the Psalmist in His Sufferings

## I. Introduction

For Descartes<sup>1</sup>, the French philosopher, the ultimate structure of life is 'thinking'. Therefore, he says *Cogito ergo sum*<sup>2</sup>. (I think, therefore I am). This stand of Descartes is challenged today by people like Leonardo Boff, the famous Brazilian liberation theologian who says that the base experience is 'feeling'. Hence the new axiom as regards life is *Sentio, ergo sum*<sup>3</sup> (I feel, therefore I am). Life is not *logos*, but *pathos*. Boff maintains that existence is never pure existence; it is an existence felt and affected by joy or sadness, by hope or anguish, strength, repentance and goodness. 'The primary relationship is a relationship without distance, of profound active passivity, in the sense of feeling the I, the world, others. . . . the ultimate structure of life is feeling, not only as a movement of the *psyche*, but as an existential quality'<sup>4</sup>. Boff believes that *pathos*, (feeling) is not in opposition to *logos* (rational comprehension). 'Feeling is also a form of knowledge, but more comprehensive and enveloping than reason. It embraces reason within itself, releasing it in all directions'<sup>5</sup>. It is this feeling that I wish to trace in the psalms, thus making my way to the psalmists. I have selected for my study some of the psalms of lamentation, under the cate-

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1. Descartes, Rene (1596-1650)

2. Adams, C and P. Tannery (Ed.), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 1897-1913, Vol. 6; p. 31.

3. Boff Leonardo: *St. Francis: A model for Human Liberation* (SCH 1982) p. 10

4. *ibid.*

5. *ibid.*

gories of Individual (ps. 3;5;7;13;17;22;25;26;27;31;35;38;39;42f; 51;55;57;59;77;88;123;140;141;142;143) and community lament (44;74;79;80;83;90;137). This study is not an exegetical and analytical one. I mean to go beyond the words and enter into the feelings of the psalmist and to understand his heart in moments of suffering. Hence, the title, 'Agony and Anguish: the Psalmist in His Sufferings'.

## II. The content of the Psalms of lament

The main element in these psalms is suffering: either it is a physical illness, or a sense of deep sinfulness, or a mental agony or social alienation or loneliness. The psalmist experiences these feelings in person and as a member of the covenant community, then in the presence of God he pours them out. In what follows we list those elements specifically which brought in him these feelings.

### 1) In the Psalms of the individual lament

#### a) Wickedness of the enemies and the innocence of the Psalmist

For the psalmist the enemies are those who threaten him. He feels that they are wicked, oppressive and evil. From the religious point of view, they are godless (5:12; 10:3; 14:14; 28:5; 36:1; 52:7; 54:3; 55:19 73:27; 86:14; 119:85,139). They despise and challenge God (10:2-3). They have no fear of God (7:14). Because of their ungodliness, they are not good to their fellowmen. Their hearts are closed to pity. They show obese indifference to the cries of suffering (17:9). Their hearts are full of wickedness (5:9b). It is in those hearts they plan out and devise evil schemes (10:2b). Their mouths are abodes of lies (5:9a); their throats are like graves that bury the innocent and just (5:9c); their tongues flatter and falsify the truth (5:9d). They are poisonous (140:3).

They are the ones who never reflect upon their lives (7:12). They feel secure (10:6) because of the apparent success of their evil plans. Their arrogance does not permit them to mend their ways (10:2; 17:9). Therefore, they boast falsely in their success (10:3a). There is in them no feeling of gratefulness. They are violent and ever ready



to stir up quarrels among the others (140:2). Experiencing such things, the psalmist feels that these men are dangerous and destructive to society. He has certainly been the victim of such wickedness. On the otherhand, the psalmist gives a picture of himself:

He is innocent. He has not done any wrong. Never injured and distressed others (7:4). He is not violent but always followed the way of God and he is quite sure of his righteous life (17:3-4). As a religious duty he fasted and mourned for his friends (35:13-14) and kept himself away from the company of the wicked (141:5b).

But inspite of all this, he sees the wicked prosper and the just ridiculed and challenged by evil men. He experiences anguish (55:4a) terrors of death (55:4b), fear and trembling (55:5a), and finally horror (55:5b). With all these feelings he stands before God and sincerely seeks his help, for he realizes his helplessness.

#### b) Falsely accused

Another factor that is common in the psalmist's lamentation is that of being accused falsely of one thing or the other (Pss. 26:59). He does not accept the blame of which he knows nothing. He does not have anyone to support him. In order to prove his innocence he brings out his religious life-style: his integrity (26:1b); his constant trust in God (26:1c); his steadfast love and faithfulness (26:3); his distance from the company of false men and evil doers (26:4-5). He wishes to be acknowledged as righteous since he deserves it. But he knows that men cannot do it; and so he asks God to redeem him and be gracious to him (26:11).

#### c) The silence of God

Yet, another reason for the psalmist to groan is the silence of God. He is forgotten by all, including God (88:15). This is the factor that unnerves him and it is beyond his understanding. The situation makes him angry and his emotions erupt in accusatory feelings like, 'How long, O Lord' (13:1-2): 'Why' (42:9; 43:2). For him the silence of God means a dark present and a bleak future. In ps. 88 he

describes his fear in painful terms such as: 'troubles', 'sheol', 'pit', 'dead', 'slain', 'grave', 'cut off', 'regions dark and deep', 'hide thy face', 'thy wrath', 'dead assaults', 'flood', 'shunned by friend and lover', 'horror', 'shades' 'abandon', 'land of forgetfulness' and 'cast off'. In the unbearable silence of God the psalmist makes 'negative petitions', asking Yahweh to be near him.

As the silence of God is cruel and perplexing, in Ps 88, the psalmist does not utter any prayer of confidence nor any anticipation of thanksgiving.

#### d) Sickness

The psalmist is sick, struck by a deadly disease. So he is despised by all including his parents (27:10;31;142). He feels lonely (142:7a), abandoned, not cared for. As no one cares for him he falls into the dungeon of fear and emotional isolation (142:6b).

As the sickness carries within itself the germs of death, the psalmist is certainly afraid to meet it. He is convinced that death would not strike him so soon. He is lonely and not comforted by this fellow men, rather, treated like a worm. He is branded as a sinner. It causes him grief.

He describes his agony of being excluded from the human community by way of tears in his eyes, the soul in deep distress, his years, a haunting memory and his bones, crushed and beyond revival.

He wants to be out of such painful situation. So he cries aloud to God saying 'you are my refuge' (31:1-2) and 'my rock' (31:3). He places his trust and confidence in the abundant goodness of the Lord (31:19).

6. Do not hide: Ps 27:9; 55:1· 69:17; 102:10-23

'Be not silent': Ps 109:1, 28;1;39:12

'Be not far from me': Ps 22:11; 35:22, 38:21; 21:12

'Forsake me not' Ps 71:9; 38:21; 27:9-12

Chasten, strike me not. Ps 6:1; 33:1; 39:10-11

'Rebuke me not'. 6:1; 38:1; 39:11

'Cast me not off' 27:9; 51:11

See Westermann Claus, *Praise and Lament in Psalms*, 1981, footnote. 53

## e) Sin

The psalmist suffers because of his sin. He comes to the knowledge of his personal sin. It has been his own experience. He describes it as his inner rebelliousness, crookedness and a sad array of broken relationships (51). He confesses his sin, and expresses in forcible language his longing to be freed from it. Hence he says: 'I lift up my soul to you' (25:1); 'In you I trust' (25:2); 'show me your ways and paths' (25:4); blot out my offence' (51:3b); 'wash me from my guilt' (51:4a) and 'cleanse me from my sin' (51:4b).

In the psalmist we note a sincere, open character, a noble soul. When he comes into the presence of God he shows his true repentance in humility and contrition. He trusts in the abundant mercy and steadfast love of God.

He understands that God's love is stronger than his sin. He, therefore, feels that his sin is forgiven and he is set free from himself. Thus he experiences peace and joy which he promises to share with others.

## f) Ultimate questions

Seeing all the suffering around him, and his indivisible union with sin, his own fragility and weakness, the psalmist feels disgusted, and thus questions the meaning of existence. He poses a question like this: 'what is life after all'? He answers it by saying that life is fleeting and it's only a breath (39:5). This is certainly not a theoretical question of an objective observer, but the question of the one whose existence has been shattered<sup>7</sup>.

2) Sometimes, the subject of the psalm is not an individual but a community. The entire people lament because of the enemy's threat and because of the silence of God.

## a) Threat from the enemies

The enemies are the hostile neighbours. They devise crafty plans in order to destroy Israel. They are powerful and rich, always successful, never knowing any want.

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7. C. Westermann, *op cit.*, p. 196



Therefore the entire people feel dejected, helpless because they seem to be doomed by the enemy. The action of the enemy is two fold:

- i) Against people: Conquest of the land (79:1-7), destruction of Jerusalem (80:16), desecration of the temple (74:4-7), killing and terrorizing (94:6), crushing and afflicting (94:5)
- ii) Slander and abuse (79:10; 74:10; 44:13-16; 89,41:50-51; 94:3; 12:34)<sup>e</sup>.

In the face of their defeat, they implore God, by pronouncing their belongingness to God: 'your inheritance', 'your servants', 'your holy temple', 'your possession'. This feeling of belongingness gives them confidence to accept the present situation.

b) Silence of God

It is in fact, an experience of the entire community. So they ask themselves unanswerable questions starting with, 'why?'

'Why have you rejected us?' (74:1)

'Why have you forgotten your people?' (44:24)

'Why do you sleep?' (44:23)

'Why do you hide your face?' (44:24)

'Why does your anger smoke?' (74:1)

It seems to be a reaction to the blow of suffering experienced by the community. The people are on their way to find the reason for such an alienation of God.

Another way that the psalmist shows his duress is by asking the question 'How long?'. In this question the feelings of anger, bitterness and a mild reproach are evident. 'How long will you be angry?' (79:5; 80:4; 85:5; 89:46) 'How long will you hide yourself?' (89:46). There are also feelings of rejection (44:9; 108:11; 60:10; 89:38), chastisement (90:15) voiced by the community. In this silence of God the community finds a dichotomy between the past actions and the present silence of Yahweh (44:23-26). Yet in this silence the people communicate something beyond words. Their faith is not shaken. They turn to God and implore him

<sup>e</sup> C. Westermann, *op cit.*, p. 180, footnote, 45

desperately 'to arise and come' (74:22-23).

### III. Conclusion

It seems evident from the preceding study that the psalmist is a man of faith. In the face of suffering and hopelessness he does not turn to any man, but to God, who proved to be faithful. He pours out his soul, his anguish, fear, helplessness, insecurity, pain, aspirations and visions. He approaches God with great confidence. That is why he calls him 'rock', 'salvation', 'refuge'. While addressing him for help, he cries aloud that God might hear him. It is nothing but the intensity of his agony.

Reading through the psalms of community lamentation one comes across the fact that even in the light of destruction and annihilation the community does not lose faith. It continues to cling to God, by ruminating on the mercies shown to them in the past. They rely upon him so much that they find no one else to turn to. It is in this community faith that the faith of each individual got matured.

It is also correct to say that the individual psalmist is a believer — an orthodox believer in Yahweh: He stands before God and opens his heart sincerely. He weeps, cries, pleads for pardon, renders thanks, invokes blessings. He does not pretend to be unharmed in the face of troubles. Since he is a man of heart, he expresses all his anguish to God and asks him to heal him. For him prayer means, the opening of his heart, the expression of all his feelings. In God he finds some one who listens. Thus, prayer becomes a moment of grace and a grip to face daily life joyfully. In the psalmist we find the pattern of a man who is fully human and fully alive. To meet him means to be like him in prayer. In a discourse on psalm 31 St. Augustine writes:

'If the psalm prays, pray; if it grieves, grieve; if it is happy, rejoice; if it hopes, hope and if it fears be afraid. For everything that is written here is a mirror in which we see ourselves'<sup>9</sup>.

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# Individual Laments in Hebrew Poetry: a Positive Response to the Problem of Suffering

## Introduction

Suffering is the lot of mankind. Man has throughout history tried to cope with it. He tries to avoid, endure, accept or completely reject it. Although it is evil and painful, the values of suffering are not mere intellectual rationalization but pragmatic, existential and far-reaching experience.

The J. Source traces human suffering back to the origin of human race. Suffering could be seen as an intrusion in this created universe because God made the world and admired his work (Gen. 1:31); inevitably, the entry of sin brought with it evil and suffering. Although, God is not the author of evil, he is nonetheless conceived as the cause of all these phenomena. The Old Testament does not therefore shy away from attributing to God the cause of all evil (see Amos 3:6; Isa 45:7), or the knowledge of its existence and operation, though evil agents might be responsible for some immediate issues. The popular view is that Yahweh permitted Satan to test Job (Job 1:8-12).

Among the numerous ways by which man has tried to cope with suffering is lament. Two aspects of lament existed. One is an expression of grief as a result of despondency, self-defeatism and absolute loss of hope or faith in Yahweh. The other is a confessional entreaty in which a man looked up to God as a righteous judge, able to vindicate and salvage him from the hands of his wicked

enemies. A man, in either spiritual or physical agony, might express faith that he would eventually be saved.

We shall illustrate our view points with a subcategory of Hebrew poetry known as individual Laments exemplified in Psalm 51. The features of this Psalm would be examined and analysed (as a paradigm) against the background of some other confessional entreaties of extra-Biblical documents of the Old Testament times.

## I

### **Psalms of Lament: community or individual affair ?**

A few more Psalms were included in the subcategory of *Individual Laments* by Herman Gunkel in his brilliant taxonomy of Hebrew Poems. They are Psalms 3,5,7,13,17,22, 27:4-28 and 31. Others which involve penitence for sin include Psalms 32,33,51,102,130 and 143.

Invariably, Laments are presented with singular pronoun 'I'. This structural feature has brought in some divergent views on the issue of setting the proper context of Laments of individuals and communities. The singular pronoun presupposes an individual experience. Could it be inferred that only individuals were known to have expressed grief over sins, hardship and misfortune? Could there not have been such things as community expression of sense of remorse and penitence over national disaster? It could be that the Laments were community experiences carefully collected and worded in singular pronouns even though they imply community responsibility and experience. It is still difficult to classify the Psalms without reconsidering the objective criteria which Gunkel had previously used in his own taxonomy. The arguments for and against why a particular Psalm of Lament should be classified as either a community lament or an individual one is beyond the scope of this study.

Individual laments could be more appropriately analysed along the lines commentators had adopted in the past. It has been observed that one of the principal aims



of every commentator was to determine the date and historical background out of which the Psalms originated. That invariably placed each in its *Sitz im Leben*. Each commentator, however, had got his own favourite period to which most Psalms were ascribed<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, divergences exist and there seems to be no centre of orthodoxy.

In most recent times, the emphasis rather shifted to a methodology of asking for the purposes for which each Psalm was written and to which ritual use it was applied<sup>2</sup>. The shifting of the emphasis from *date and history* to *purpose and function* was a feature of intellectual quest that obviously did not bother early users and worshippers. There are therefore disagreements still among scholars as there were when the approach was historical. One obvious fact is that each scholar's approach depended on the school of thought that influenced him.

Literary critical approach adopted by Herman Gunkel was used to study the types of Psalms and the purposes they served. From his approach, Gunkel inferred that *Songs of Thanksgiving* are older than *Psalms of Lament* and in both the national Psalms came earlier than the individual ones. The logic of Gunkel's deduction is weak and may not be taken fully on its face value. A more critical approach needs to be considered. We are aware of the fact that in many traditional and undislocated societies, individual consciousness and spirituality were usually not given full freedom of expression. What mattered most was the community welfare and interest. The same was observed in the Hebrew religious system.

R. Smend (1888), for instance, in his assessment of the Israelite religion, underscored individual religious consciousness in a subtle way, particularly in his analysis of

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1. A. R. Johnson, 'The Psalms' in H.H. Rowley (Ed) *The Old Testament in Modern Study* (Oxford: O.U.P. 1951) pp XXIV. J.H. Eaton, 'The Psalms', the R.C. Walton (ed) *A Source Book of the Bible for Teachers* (London: S.C.M. Press, Ltd., 1970) 157-158

2. A.R. Johnson, *Ibid.*, Cf. M. Jastrow, *Aspects of Religious Belief in Babylonia and Assyria* (1911)

the Psalms. He had argued that the 'I' in the Psalms does not stand for an individual personality but a personification of the community whose enemies are the other nations. He therefore concluded that the singular 'I' has no reference to any particular crisis in individual life. This view looks too far-stretched to one side, one that leans more to the projection of the community and underplaying the individual personality and consciousness.

The community emphasis has an implication of playing down the existence of individual Psalms of thanksgiving or lament. Gunkel has argued that the personality of the individual *per se* in the Psalms emerged only after religion had been detached from cult, a very late development in the religious history of the Jews. Thus Psalm 51, perhaps, may not be historically associated with David's moral lapse. Statistically, the number of Psalms of Lament which depict individual consciousness and experience seems to outstrip those of thanksgiving. Could it be that they emerged when a more private type of piety was in vogue in Israel? Could there have been no earlier existence of some Laments of purely individual character and nature in the distant past?

It was Sigmund Mowinckel who related most of the psalms (individual and communal), hymns and liturgy more directly to the cult than did Gunkel. Accordingly, Mowinckel had opined that most psalms were originally composed for use in the cult. He read most of them in the background of primitive magic and some of them are interpreted in terms of the Babylonian New Year festivals of the Royal Psalms of Enthronement<sup>3</sup>. He regarded the psalms as cultic poems, thus implying that they were written for ritual use and employed in the cult to accompany ritual acts. If this view is analysed against the background of the way the psalms were used, one may consider it as adequate. But when the psalms are analysed in terms of their relationship with primitive magic and fertility cult, the assertion becomes inadequate and completely doubtful.

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3. Hans-Joachim Krauss, *Worship in Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament* (Oxford. Basil Blackwell, 1966) p 14

and one would be hesitant to accept it on its face value.

H.H. Rowley who accepted the cultic use of the psalms would rather link it to the post-exilic period when they were collected for such purposes<sup>4</sup>. This looks like the view of Gunkel but cannot be said to be totally dependent on it.

R. Duhnn (1889) has also argued that individual spirituality and personal relationship with God reflected a late Old Testament period when religion had been freed from cult. It was a period of frequent suffering of the pious in the hands of godless men. The psalmist was thus seen as a representative of the pious *Hasidim*, the poor, the innocent, and the meek.

There are some proposals that Psalms of lament are a reflection of party strife of post-exilic Judaism, possibly during the period of the Maccabees. This view disagrees with Mowinckel's who stated that Psalms indicate notions, language and religious forms current in the early cult which the prophets later applied to their existential experiences. This therefore brings in the identity of people supposed to have been involved in the laments whether as individuals or as a community. They were the poor, the humble, and the persecuted — the pious. The enemies responsible for the distress that occasioned the laments, according to Gunkel, were the self-righteous neighbours or erstwhile friends and associates who see the Psalmist's suffering as a clear evidence of retribution for sin<sup>5</sup>. In addition, Gunkel suggested that a number of factors occasioned the lament. They included illness, calamity, and other physical distress which could bring pain on the afflicted.

The Psalmist sees himself as the poor, humble, afflicted or the down-trodden as opposed to the rich, powerful, arrogant and oppressor who laughed at the poor saying,

4. H.H. Rowley, *The Old Testament in Modern Study* (Oxford: O.U.P. 1951) 132

5. H. H. Rowley, *Ibid.*, 172. Cf. W.O.E. Osterly, *The Psalms* (1939)

'It is only the righteous who prosper'<sup>6</sup> and looked upon illness and misfortune as a divine visitation and disfavour on the sinful and the evil.

Mowinckel took up the question of this relationship between the Psalmist's misfortune (mostly illness) and the enemies in line with Gunkel's thought. The enemies, according to him were workers of iniquity and manipulators of magic (perhaps counter-part of Babylonian magicians?)

In sum, suffering whether understood in the form of individual experience in the nature of sickness or poverty or as a community affair in the form of subjection to surrounding nations (as conceived by most prophetic writers), was completely interpreted as punitive or retributive in character. This emanated from the traditionally held view that Yahweh ruled the universe and he gave to men what they deserved. This had been the basis of the arguments of the friends of Job who came to sympathize with him<sup>7</sup>. We shall now turn to assess how scholars looked at this problem in more recent times.

## II

### Individual laments in modern scholarship

The identity of the Psalmist from the discussions so far has been a matter of speculation. Modern scholars have not done much in ascertaining who the Psalmist is — Is he a single honest man suffering or could he be a community that is threatened by an enemy nation?

In 1928, H. Schmidt came up with a suggestion that the lament was uttered by those who had been falsely accused of some offences and pleaded with God for acquittal and justification. This assumption of the communal nature of the victim is no new addition to the old suggestions. The obvious fact that stands out here is the firm

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6. H.H. Rowley, *Op.Cit.*, See also G R. Driver, *The Psalmist* (1926), 109-195  
 7. H:E. Hopkins, *The Mystery of Suffering*, 1939, Psalm. O.S. Rankin, *Israel's Wisdom Literature*, pp. 79



belief that God could both acquit and justify, a manifestation of faith in Yahweh.

Not until 1967, no new serious contribution was registered in the quest for the personality of the Psalmist. In that year, I. Delekat came up with an idea that could not be said to be entirely new. He saw the lament as defence pleas against the accusers of the Psalmist. To him, the Psalmist was pleading to be admitted to the sanctuary as a place of divinely-protected asylum where he could be assured of quiet and silence. This desire presupposes the wish of an individual who had previously enjoyed that privilege: an expression of faith in the face of trouble!

From the foregoing discussion, some conclusions could be made. First, individual laments adequately fit into a post-exilic period as Gunkel vehemently maintained. It could be better seen against the background of the cultic rituals as has been presented by Mowinckel. Secondly, whether or not the laments are primarily a community affair, they are still suitable for a personal expression of grief or faith in a God who is not only able to save but also willing to restore. Hence the Psalmist does not curse God.

Therefore in its *Sitz im Leben*, the words of Psalm 51 appropriately fit into the repentant mood of king David after his immoral affair with Bathsheba and the intrigue which culminated in her husband's death in the battle front. Here in the entreaty we do not observe faith only but also meekness as a feature of Hebrew piety.

A desire for divine forgiveness is at the heart of the lament. It tends to reduce the burden of the grief in the heart of the penitent. An individual undergoing such a period of spiritual and physical torture could personally appropriate the Psalms and apply them to his own religious experience and consciousness. Using Psalm 51 as a paradigm, we could decipher a deep agony and penitence of a religious individual, a pleading for mercy and restoration. It is only a bold mind that is prompted by faith that is unshaken which can meekly acknowledge its faults and

ask for restoration. One who has no faith in a forgiving God, cannot turn back to him in difficulty to ask for forgiveness and restoration.

Ritual sacrifice is not strongly emphasized in the whole scheme although this is not a strong evidence for placing the Psalm within the era of the second Temple — thereby denying Davidic authorship and influence which has been traditionally associated with it. Julius Bever has strongly argued that Psalm 51 seems to express the deep personal piety of the Psalmist independently expressed<sup>8</sup>. Here in this Psalm of entreaty, the heart speaks out of its depth, prays for help and forgiveness, thanks God for his grace and sings his praise. It is only a faith prompted soul that can thus express such radiant hope instead of complaints of despondency.

### III

#### Individual laments in extra-biblical texts

Following Mowinckel's theory of cultic origin of most Old Testament Psalms, it has been observed that they share similar structural pattern with Babylonian ancient poems<sup>9</sup>. Although the structure may look alike, the Jewish theological experience and expression of faith clearly stand out in their interpretation of Yahweh's character.

There are seven main features in Psalm 51.

- (a) Plea for mercy and cleansing vv.1-2 (with special attention to God)
- (b) Acknowledgement and confession of sin, God's holiness and justice clearly spelt out vv.3-6. The Psalmist admits guilt and confesses directly to God and recognizes the demands of God from His people.
- (c) Renewed plea for thorough cleansing and forgiveness vv.7-9.
- (d) Appeal for cleansing the old nature, creation of a brand new heart and pure conscience, vv. 10-12,14.

8. Julius Bever, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (3rd Edition Columbia: Columbia Univ. Press, 1962) p. 398

9 See C.J. Mullo Weir, 'Prayer to any God' in W. D Thomas (ed) *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961) 111-117

- (e) Firm resolution and promise to serve and praise Yahweh vv. 13, 14b-15.
- (f) Contrition, not sacrifice, shall obtain mercy vv. 16-17.
- (g) A vow closing the prayer — a usual feature vv. 18-19.

When Psalm 51 is juxtaposed with a typical Babylonian prayer or entreaty which looked structurally alike, there are some observable theological differences. For instance, there is a complete absence of monotheistic faith in the latter. The Babylonian text refers to many gods because one is not sure of the very god that has been offended<sup>10</sup>. The insistence on Yahweh and him alone is an absolute faith that does not waver or doubt. A Jew knows that unconfessed sin clogs vitality and can impede God's forgiveness which he needs in his suffering. While the Old Testament Lament is addressed to a particular deity (Yahweh), the Babylonian ideas do not reflect such a high theological concept of connecting sin and suffering to a disruption of relationship with their chief deity. A close look at Psalm 51 v.1 and the first two lines of a 'Prayer to any God' — its Babylonian equivalent, could help to clarify this point.

Psalm 51:1

Have mercy on me O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.

Babylonish Prayer: (of) my Lord — may the anger of His heart to its place return; of the god who is unknown, to its place (return).

Besides the differences, there are some areas of fundamental similarity in both poems. Both look similar in their structure as already indicated, possibly pointing to a common species but modified by other factors like tradition, ecology, religious experience and history.

It is obvious that what looked a penitential Psalm in the Old Testament times served a psychological purpose in the spiritual well-being of the individual. The extra-

10. C.J. Mulloy Weir, *Ibid.*, 112, Cf S.H Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion* (1953)

biblical texts seemed to have served similar purpose in their own environments and religious systems. In spite of their structural similarity, the Hebrew confessional entreaty seemed to have added an extra slant — that of overt manifestation of faith in one God — Yahweh. This similarity is not surprising when it is recalled that the Ras Sharma tablets show that when Israel attacked Canaan, the type of poetry represented in the Psalms was already a long-established tradition among the people of Ugarit.

#### IV

##### Optimism and pessimism in the psalter

Although we have seen the individual lament in the psalter as an optimistic attitude to suffering, it does not reflect all the mixed attitudes of the Psalmist to the problem of suffering. There are a few Psalms that are not within Gunkel's classification of Psalms of Lament. They present a pessimistic view of life which arises out of a realistic attitude to the problem of suffering. While the Psalms of Lament and confessional entreaties express faith, some other Psalms do not in themselves clearly reflect any hope after the torture. For instance, in Ps 39, the writer pleads with God to remove his stroke 'from me' for 'I am consumed by the blow of your hand'. The pessimistic attitude also sees the wicked in prosperity and the godly in adversity. In desperation, he goes on to complain that man is so insignificant a thing to worry about. Consequently the only open way to man was either to resign to one's lot or plead for a respite before he is completely annihilated and forgotten. The utter expression of hopelessness in the Psalm does not look beyond the immediate.

A more faithful stance and interpretation of the same experience sees the prosperity of the wicked as mere illusion and transitory, their end will be desolate. So even if the godly is suffering, it is a clear probation to his future bliss and success. For the faithful, the incongruities of this present world will be put right in the world to come. Present existence is but an incomplete episode. It is only the optimistic view and attitude to the problem of suffering that can appreciate its disciplinary and purificatory values



in life. This is because faith refuses to be crushed. Other Old Testament writers whose views are beyond the scope of this study have also expounded the mixed attitude to the problem of suffering particularly the traditional belief that linked sin and suffering directly.

### Conclusion

The problem of suffering is one that has consistently perplexed the Old Testament theologian and has hitherto engaged the attention of many. The simplest view of many Old Testament writers was that suffering whether understood individually in the nature of bodily sickness or material poverty or collectively in the form of attacks by enemy nations, has been seen as a visitation of the wrath of God on man. The views have been as diverse as the attitudes to the problem of suffering.

In this study we have argued that the Psalmist in his Individual Lament was not presenting a negative attitude, but affirming a positive faith in a loving God. We have shown that among the various attitudes men have depicted in the face of suffering, the Psalmist in the subcategory of Hebrew poetry designated *Individual Laments* professed a practical faith. This goes to show that the Book of Job is not the only one among the Wisdom Literature that has presented in a vivid manner man's positive attitude to the perennial problem of suffering.

Individual Laments are an aspect of a faithful expression of trust in Yahweh. The confessional entreaties of the Psalmist are not a negative response to the attacks of the evil one. The faithful is still assured that in spite of the attacks, the triumph of Yahweh will surely come.

The Psalmist in his confessional entreaties, in Psalm 51 vividly brought out the disciplinary and purificatory values of sufferings. The suffering of the faithful is not aimed at crushing him but at strengthening him at all times. The personal attitude of one passing through any difficulty is a reflection of his faith.

# **The Attitude of Jesus towards Suffering**

## **Introduction**

Suffering here on earth has ever been inseparable from human experience and men of all times and cultures have been trying to solve this problem<sup>1</sup>. People today experience pain and suffering perhaps more than ever before. It is becoming almost impossible for them to comprehend its meaning especially because they are always craving for more pleasure. They have recourse to various means either to totally remove it or at least to alleviate it. They are devising new means to do away with the bitter experience of pain and misery. In such a context it is appropriate to study the attitude of Jesus towards suffering. Did Jesus really experience pain and suffering? Had he any sympathy for the sufferings of fellow beings? Did he take steps to alleviate them? How did he react to his own bitter experiences? Did he accuse others on that account?

## **Jesus' attitude towards the sufferings of others**

The Gospels show that Jesus was very sensitive to every form of human suffering. He could not see others suffer without being profoundly moved by divine pity<sup>2</sup>. At the tomb of Lazarus he was deeply distressed and wept (Jn 11:33-36). Seeing the lepers and others suffering from similar diseases he was moved with compassion. He cured the sick who suffered physically and mentally. He had a special concern and love towards the handicapped, i.e. blind,

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1. A. D'Souza, Suffering according (to the Traditions of Egypt and Mesopotamia, *Jeevadhara*, 4 (1974) Pp. 101-120

K. Luke, Suffering according to Buddha's teaching, *Ibid.* p.p. 162-182

2. Mt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; Jn 11:14; 21-32, 36f, Lk 7:13ff; Mk 1:41

deaf, mute, the downtrodden and the outcasts of society. He grieved at the widowed mother (Lk 7:12-15) and raised her dead son back to life.

Unmindful of his own pain, he consoled the women of Jerusalem (Lk 23:27-31). He *worked miracles* not only to alleviate others' pain and to heal them physically but much more to confer on them internal peace and happiness, which announced the actual presence of the kingdom of God (Mt 11:4; Lk 4:18ff). He was the good Samaritan who did everything to alleviate the pain of his wounded fellow men and women (Lk 10:29-37). Matthew understood the miracle of Jesus as his salvific act of taking away the sufferings and infirmities of his people (Mt 8:17)<sup>3</sup>. Jesus was never instrumental in increasing the pain and afflictions of others but he always removed or at least alleviated them. His mission was to make the suffering and the afflicted aware of God's compassionate love towards them (Lk 4:18ff).

### Jesus' attitude to the reality of his own suffering

Jesus experienced manifold sufferings. He experienced hunger and thirst. The Gospel narratives do not say anything about sufferings caused by illness. But it is quite probable that he had to undergo the ordinary forms of suffering like any other human being. He also suffered from the faithless and ungrateful crowd (Mt 17:17). He was subjected to rejection from his own people (Jn 1:11) who did not really know him. He was troubled at the thought of his passion (Jn 12:27). His sufferings became a mortal distress, an agony, a combat in anguish and fear<sup>4</sup>. The Passion of Jesus gives us a complete picture of all possible forms of human suffering, from the betrayal of a close disciple to the apparent abandonment by God, his beloved Father (Mt 27:46).

### Suffering, a divine must

Jesus who underwent all forms of human sufferings

3. E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, (Atlanta) 1975 pp. 217f. Mt 8:17 contains an explicit reference to Is 53:4

4. Mk 14:33-38; Lk 22:44ff

during his earthly life, accepted the reality of suffering as a divine necessity. He understood that it was part of his Messianic vocation<sup>5</sup>. Jesus saw in his suffering the plan of God for salvation through a suffering saviour. This redeemer is identified with his people by his free decision to accept all the consequences of sin. Jesus freely decided to embrace suffering because this was the only way through which God willed to save mankind from the slavery of sin (Mk 8:31; 14:35ff).

The Greek verb *dei*, which occurs very frequently in the New Testament, is often used as a general expression for the will of God. Jesus saw his whole life, ministry and his passion as the realization of the will of God. *Dei* included the whole of God's plan for Christ and for humankind. Jesus understood his sufferings not merely as the result of a historical development of the opposition and enmity of the Jewish leaders but also as a reality which had its origin and basis in the saving will and plan of God<sup>6</sup>.

5. Mk 8:31f; 9:12f; 14:21; Wis 2:12; 5:1-7

W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, Berlin, 1965, p. 169. In Mk 8:31 the Greek verb *dei*, which occurs frequently in the New Testament, refers to a compulsion, behind which is expressed the will of God and it corresponds to the Greek expression '*gegraptai*' (it is written) Mk 9:12; 14:21-49. Jesus sees behind the historical occurrence the definite divine plan. Cf. W.L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, (Grand Rapids) 1974, P 294, n. 72. R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, (H T K N) Vol II, p 49;

6. The saying that the Son of Man must suffer many things points to the overwhelming purpose of God and reflects Jesus' conviction that the intention revealed in Scripture attains its fulfilment in the shame of the crucifixion as well as the triumph of the Resurrection. Cf. W.L. Lane, *Op. Cit.* p 301

The Secrecy motif found in Mark is related to this Divine Must. If Jesus has allowed his glory as Son of God to shine everywhere, if he had permitted the crowds their delirious enthusiasm, if he had allowed the demons to howl their servile confession, if he had permitted the apostles to divulge everywhere their sensational discovery, then the Passion would have been rendered impossible and the destiny of Jesus would have been issued in triumph, but a triumph which would have been wholly human (Mk 8:33) and which would not have accomplished the divine plan of salvation, Cf. G. Minette de Tillesse, *Le Secret Messianique, dans l'évangile de marc* (Paris) 1968



Jesus did not annihilate suffering; but he tried to console those who were its victims (Mt 5:5). He did not do away with tears; but he tried his best to wipe it out of many (Lk 7:13; 8:52). This is to be seen as a sign of the eschatological time when God would wipe away the tears from all eyes (Is 25:8; Apoc 7:7; 21:4). Jesus also refused to see a systematic relationship between sickness and sin (Jn 9:3; Lk 13:2ff). He did this because he knew the saving aspect of suffering in the divine plan. It can be a blessing, for it prepares one to welcome the kingdom (Lk 15:17-21; 23:41-43); it reveals also the works of God (Jn 9:3) and the glory of the Father (Jn 11:4). Hence Jesus knew suffering as the only way through which God willed to save the sinful humankind, and it became a blessing in the salvific plan of God<sup>7</sup>. In his person Jesus revealed its mystery dimension.

### Jesus' suffering, an act of filial obedience to God, the Father

Jesus realized his Messianic vocation in the Scriptures especially in the fourth Servant Song of Isaiah (Is 52:13-53:12). Jesus' understanding of the Messiah as described in the sufferings of the servant of the Lord, reveals his realism as well as his awareness of the Father's will. He suffered rejection and underwent humiliation and death on behalf of others (Mk 10:45; 14:22ff; 8:31). He accepted this destiny in submission to the divine will and it is his perfect human response to God's call to accomplish his divine commission. Here Jesus conceived suffering as his active and free response to his Messianic vocation. Fully conscious of this call, Jesus prayed: 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt' (Mk 14:36). Hereby Jesus was trying to learn obedience through his suffering (Heb 5:7-10)<sup>8</sup>.

### In suffering Jesus encounters His Father

Jesus was fully conscious of the cost of his submission

7. L. Ruppert, *Jesus als der leidende Gerechte* (SBS 59, Stuttgart, 1972). W.L. Lane, *Op.Cit.* pp 301f
8. W. Michaelis, *Art. cit. TDNT V*, pp. 914ff  
L. Schenke, *Der gekreuzigte Christus* (SBS 69), 1971, pp. 131-132

to the will of God<sup>9</sup>. In Gethsemane he experienced agony but in his arrest and throughout the subsequent trial Jesus showed a resolute calmness. He received strength from God through prayer to face every kind of rejection and suffering. He went to Gethsemane not to seek the sympathy and support of his most intimate friends and disciples. True friendship is usually understood as the sharing of inmost thoughts, the exchange of feelings, hopes, sorrows and joys. This is a reality that Jesus does not seem to have enjoyed at all with the Twelve. For him this was possible with the Father alone. It is to him that Jesus turned in his hour of test. Being in agony he prayed more earnestly, writes Luke (Lk. 22:42-44).

The profound sorrow and anxiety out of which sprang the prayer of Jesus for the removal of the cup was not an expression of his fear of a dark destiny, nor was it a shrinking away from the prospect of physical suffering and death, as it is reflected in the psalms of Lament (Pss 55:4ff, 10ff; 22:8ff). It was the horror of one who lived wholly for the Father at the thought of alienation from God as manifested in the judgement on sin, which Jesus had assumed. This horror was the beginning of Jesus' pain in Gethsemane and it reached its climax in the cry of dereliction on the cross (Mk 15:34). Jesus came to the garden to be with the Father for a brief period before his betrayal, but he found hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered (Is 51:17, 23; Ps 60:3)<sup>10</sup>. In this moment of distress Jesus did not hesitate to speak to God with the freedom of a son in all simplicity, inwardness and confidence. His invocation *Abba*, the familiar household term in addressing God, reveals the heart of his relationship with God<sup>11</sup>.

The prayer of Jesus reveals the complete surrender of the Son in patient obedience to the Father which is ex-

9. Mk 10:38, 1:9-11; 14:32-42; Lk 24:26-46

10. Le Deaut, 'Gouter la calice de la mort', *Bib* 43. (1962) pp. 82-96

11. J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, (London) 1967, pp 67f

W. Marchel, 'Abba', *Pater, Oratione Christiet Christianorum*, VD 39 (1961) pp 240-247; R. Baumann, *Abba, lieber Pater, zum biblischen Gottesbild*, *Bibel und Kirche*, 22 (1967) pp. 73-78

pressed in his words: 'if it is possible, and not what I will but rather what you will' (Mk 14:36). Humanly speaking, the Son had the possibility of an independent will; but this will and choice existed only to be negated in the face of the divine will. Here lies the paradox of the mystery of suffering. The perfect agreement of Jesus' human will with the divine is seen in the declaration of this negation. In his prayer Jesus clearly grasped this dimension of his suffering and received strength from his Father to accept the cup. He prepared himself for his own intense trial through vigilance and prayer and this gave to his disciples and to the church a model for the correct approach to face the eschatological trial.

The evangelists did not describe the physical pain and mental distress of Jesus in crucifixion. They have mentioned only Jesus' cry on the cross (Mk 15:34; Ps 22:1). Jesus expressed his feelings in a biblical language, quite spontaneous to Jewish vocabulary, imploring the help of God in a confident invocation and an anguished plea. The full alienation from God which he felt during the Passion reached its climax in this cry. The sinless Son of God died a sinner's death and experienced the bitterness of total abandonment. This was the cost of becoming a ransom for many. But Jesus did not die renouncing and denying God. In the bitter experience of abandonment he did not deny his faith in God, but expressed his anguished prayer in a cry of affirmation: 'My God, My God'<sup>12</sup>. Hence he transformed his suffering into an intense prayer of confidence and commitment to God, his beloved Father (Mk 14:36; 15:34). In his sufferings he experienced a profound communion with God which even survived death (Mk 14:25).

### **Suffering, a punishment for sin**

There was a popular Judaic view that specific sufferings are punishment for the personal sins of those

12. H.C. Read, *The Cry of Dereliction*. *ExT* 65, (1957) 260-62

L. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids) 1965, pp. 42-49

V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to Mark*, (London), 1952, pp. 594

who endure them and that therefore they are proportionate to the malice of their sins. This was explicitly rejected by Jesus (Lk 13:2-5; Jn 9:3). But sufferings in general, to which humankind is subject, result from the sins of people. The death of Jesus on the cross was caused by the sins of the Jewish leaders and at the same time it was a punishment for the sins of humanity. Jesus' death symbolically caused the destruction of the sanctuary which was the punishment of God against the chosen people (Mk 15:38; 11:17; Jer 7:11ff).

### **Suffering, revelation of love**

The miracles and other deeds of Jesus revealed his love and sympathy towards the afflicted and the oppressed. He ardently desired to lessen the burden and misery of the people. Exorcisms and the healing miracles show how Jesus tried to liberate men from the slavery of sin and other kinds of afflictions. Above all, through his humiliation and violent death he gave himself as a ransom for many. His sufferings and violent death sealed the new covenant (Mk 14:22-24), and it is the expression of the climax of his love towards his fellow men. He gave himself for them and shed his blood for many (Mk 10:45; 14:22ff). Blood was the symbol of life. The shedding of the blood signified sacrifice which can be offered to God alone. So his self-giving which implied suffering and death was the realization of his love towards God and his fellow men<sup>13</sup>. And his sufferings and death liberated many from the bondage of sin. Even in the moment of his agony he thought of his disciples and warned them about the danger of failure in the struggle which was about to overwhelm them. In the midst of pain and suffering, mockery and derisions, he prayed for his enemies and forgave them. The sufferings of Jesus revealed the twofold dimensions of love: Jesus' humiliations are the concrete expression of God's love which was intended by God the Father to heal the disobedience of man's sin (Rm 5:10f; Jn 3:16ff). Jesus accepting the cup, poured out his own love through

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13. The shedding of Jesus' blood implies, the idea of forgiveness (Heb 9:22), Cf. R. Pesch, *Op. cit.* 359f; W.L. Lane, *Op. cit.* 507



obedience to his Father (Mk 14:35ff). Physical and mental sufferings have their own limitations, but love which is essentially divine knows no limitation. The physical reality of suffering and death has no meaning without love. In other words, the sufferings of Christ have meaning and salvific power only through love. This love of Jesus, realized in his self-giving, was responded by his Father. God the Father raising his Son from the dead to eternal glory revealed his faithfulness to him. Hence the sufferings of Jesus led him to glory and his death to resurrection (Mk 8:31; 9:10; Lk 24:26,46).

### Conclusion

The attitude of Jesus to suffering creates in us hope and confidence. Jesus actively reacted to the reality of suffering which is inseparable from daily human life. He did not rationalize the human problem of suffering; he did not flee from it; he did not promise to take it away from human life. Rather he accepted it as an essential element of his Messianic vocation. He did not try to alleviate his own sufferings; he did not perform any miracle to that effect. He did not complain against any one about it. But he alleviated the pain of his fellow men. This is the sign of the actual presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus freely accepts humiliation, sufferings and death as part of his active and loving response to the will of God. It was the expression of his filial love and obedience to God and his sacrificing love towards his fellow men. Suffering as welcomed by Jesus reminds us that we are not created for this world. It reminds us of the pilgrim aspect of our life. This world must be changed (Jn 17:9,16f). Suffering transforms us and educates us; it purges our faith from self love and the love of the world (2 Tm 1:8-12). Suffering increases our capacity for love and understanding. Jesus' attitude to the sufferings of peoples reveals its power of communion. He also teaches that in and through suffering people learn that they need God. Only through suffering one knows how to develop in one the most beautiful thing a human being can give to another:

compassion, sharing and communion (Mt 25:45ff). The suffering Jesus, a wounded and broken person dying on the cross, established between himself and us a mysterious solidarity which allows his suffering to become ours<sup>14</sup>. In him suffering has become sacred and salvific, for it is the revelation of God's salvific love. In Christ suffering has become a means of communion and a source of salvation.

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14. M. Vellanickal, Suffering in the Life and Teaching of Jesus, *Jeevadhara*, 4 (1974) 161f

# **Discipleship and Suffering in the Gospel of Mark\***

Mark in his Gospel lays special emphasis on the mystery of suffering. This emphasis is seen both in his presentation of Jesus and of discipleship. It is true that Jesus' suffering plays a central role in the Marcan theology. Jesus cannot be understood unless he is seen as the suffering, dying and rising Son of Man (cf. Mk 8:31). Since Mark presents Jesus as the pattern for the disciples to follow and since suffering and cross were an integral part of Jesus' person and mission (cf. Mk 8:31 and 10:45), there is no true understanding of discipleship apart from the reality of suffering and the cross. Jesus states in a clear and unambiguous way: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mk 8:34). The full implication of the call to discipleship (cf. Mk 1:16-20) is given concrete expression in the second part of Mark's Gospel (8:31-16:8), where the real identity and destiny of the disciple are revealed after the pattern of Jesus' identity and destiny as the suffering, dying and rising Son of Man. There are historical as well as theological reasons for Mark to give greater importance to the theme of suffering in his Gospel.

## **1. Persecution as a continual threat to the Marcan community**

It is the general opinion of the New Testament scholars

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\*. This article is largely based on my doctoral dissertation entitled, 'Discipleship. A Call to Suffering and Glory. An Exegetico-Theological Study of Mk 8:27-9:1; 13:9-13 and 13:24-27', which was defended on 15th January, 1987 in the Theological Faculty of the Pontifical Urban University, Rome and was published later in Rome

that Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome and had in mind primarily the Roman Christians, the majority of whom were gentile converts<sup>1</sup>. It is most probable that the Gospel was written during the last years of the reign of Nero who was the emperor of Rome from 54 to 68 A. D. One of the purposes of writing the Gospel was to nourish and strengthen the shattered faith of the Christians who were severely persecuted by Nero.

On 19th July, 64 a disastrous fire broke out in the city of Rome and it consumed nearly one fourth of the city. Nero himself is said to have caused the fire in order to provide space for his building programme. Tacitus, the Roman historian of that time, reports that Nero diverted attention from himself by attributing the cause of the fire to the Christians. Thus there broke out a fierce persecution. The Christians were afflicted with cruel and unusual punishments. Some were dressed in wild animals' skins and attacked by fierce dogs; some were crucified; still others were coated with tar and set on fire. It is most probable that the Apostles Peter and Paul were put to death during this persecution. Then it was that Mark wrote his Gospel in order to strengthen and guide the Christians of the time as they were faced with persecution and were in danger of losing their lives for their faith in Jesus Christ. Thus Mark was writing for a martyr Church and his Gospel has been called 'the martyr Gospel' — that is, the Gospel intended for the strengthening and encouraging of the Christians who faced martyrdom<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. The persecution motif in the Gospel of Mark

It is true that persecution is not presented in the Gospel of Mark openly and in detail. But there are certain passages which presuppose a context of persecution for the readers of the Gospel. For example, in the interpretation of the parable of the sower it is said that some

1. Cf. D.E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark* (PNTC, London, 1963), 32-34; W.L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Michigan, 1974), 12-21; E. Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburg: 1983), 34-36

2. Cf. D.E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark*, 33



of those who receive the word endure for a while but 'they fall away (*skandalizontai*) when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word' (4:17). Sufferings are a temptation or test whether the Christian will stand by 'the word' (that is, the Gospel message, the content of which is Jesus himself) even at the risk of his life or not (comp Lk 8:13: '... and in time of *temptation* fall away'). In Mk 10:29-30 those who left everything to follow Jesus are promised a new family, a hundredfold greater than the one they left, but 'with persecutions' which will come 'now in this time' (10:30).

Mk 8:34-38 appears to be an ardent appeal made to Christians who are taken to court in a situation of persecution. The fact that the disciples are called upon to remain loyal not only to the historical Jesus but also to *his words* (cf: 8:38) indicates that, after Jesus' resurrection, 'his word', that is, his teaching (his 'Gospel', cf. 8:35) became the target of persecution. In Mk 13:9-13 the disciples are warned that they will be delivered up to Jewish and pagan courts for Jesus' sake 'to bear testimony before them' (13:9). The two stories about the storms at sea (4:35-41 and 6:45-52) could well be understood as the way in which Jesus saves the Christian community in time of persecution. Again, Mk 9:43-47 has an obvious link with a situation of persecution<sup>3</sup>. All these factors indicate that persecution forms the total background as a continual threat of the Marcan community to whom the Gospel was written in order to bring home the inevitability of suffering to the believer if he is to be a disciple of Christ<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Mark's special emphasis on the mystery of suffering

Mark has artistically blended a theology of suffering with a theology of glory. L. Schenke gives us the reasons for the existence of these two theologies in the Gospel of

3. Cf. B.M.F. Van Iersal, 'The Gospel according to St. Mark - Written for a persecuted Community?', *NedTTs* 34 (1980), 21-27.

4. Cf. E. Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story*, 34.

Mark<sup>5</sup>. According to him, the Marcan community celebrated the resurrected and glorified Christ as its Lord and considered the cross of Christ only as a past episode in the life of Jesus, and not as a genuine symbol of faith. They had the resurrected Christ as their model and believed that they could share already in his glory. They forgot that the way of the disciple was none other than that of the Master, that is, the way of suffering and the cross. Mark now criticizes the onesided assertions about the glory of Jesus from the stand-point of a theology of the cross. He does agree that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and the exalted Lord. But he strongly affirms that it is only through the suffering and death on the cross that Jesus entered his present glory. The blending of these two theologies results in the formulation of the following phrase: 'glory through suffering'. This is applicable first in the case of Jesus: the Son of Man must suffer, die and rise again (cf. Mk 8:31; cf. also 9:31; 10:33-34); then in the case of his disciples: suffering and persecution for Jesus' sake will lead to salvation (cf. Mk 8:34-9:1; 13:9-13, 24-27). However, Mark has given a special emphasis to the theology of suffering in his Gospel. This is evident, first, in his presentation of the messianic mystery of Jesus and, secondly, in the way he has portrayed the true nature and challenges of discipleship.

### **A. The suffering Messiah as the pattern for disciples**

A true understanding of discipleship demands a true understanding of Jesus, the Divine Master. It is significant that Mark begins the second part of his Gospel by revealing the mystery of Jesus' person and destiny. The way Jesus has chosen to reveal his identity as the Christ and the Son of God was the way of suffering and the cross. This way of the Messiah portrayed in 8:31 is intended by Mark to be a pattern for the disciples to follow.

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5. L. Schenke, *Glory and the Way of the Cross*, The Gospel of Mark (ET; Chicago, 1972) 13-56

### 1) The "must" of Jesus' suffering

It is for the first time in the Gospel of Mark that we hear from Jesus in an unambiguous way that he is the Son of Man who must suffer, die and rise again: "And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). Among the Synoptists it is Mark alone who presents the passion prediction as a *teaching*, the object of which is Jesus' own divinely decreed destiny.

This teaching of Jesus is to be understood against the background of Peter's messianic confession. His confession at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-30) is to be seen as the climax and conclusion of the first part of Mark's Gospel (1:1-8:30). It is a great turning point in the whole of Marcan theology. Peter's confession, "you are the Christ" (8:29b) functions as a new revelation in the world of human characters who are presented up to now as ignorant of Jesus' true identity. Although Peter's confession is in itself correct, he could not include the dimension of suffering in his use of the title "Christ" as is evident from the subsequent story (cf. 8:32b-33). That is why Jesus imposes silence on the disciples (cf. 8:30) and immediately reveals in 8:31 the mystery of the Messiah in terms of the suffering and rising Son of Man. This revelation of suffering is fundamental to the right understanding of Jesus' Messiahship and the true nature of discipleship.

The first passion prediction in Mark speaks of a 'must' (*dei*) of the suffering, death and resurrection of the Son of Man: 'The Son of man *must* (*dei*) suffer ... and be rejected ... and be killed, and ... rise again' (8:31; cf. also parallel texts in Mt 16:21 and Lk 9:22). All the four verbs<sup>6</sup> which follow are governed by this 'must' and describe the destiny of the Son of Man. In Mark this is the only instance where 'must' is used of Jesus' suffering. It is a necessity determined by the will of God and this divine necessity of

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6. In the Greek original they are in the infinitive.

suffering belongs to God's plan of eschatological salvation. Jesus' suffering and death are part of the mission which God has entrusted to him; it is the will of God that he should suffer and die. Mark presents Jesus not as a passive agent of this divine necessity but as a creative executor of that necessity (cf. Mk 10:32; cf. also Lk 9:51; 13:32-33; Jn 10:17-18; 19:17). Jesus clearly foresees his suffering and death, but he accepts them as his own mission (cf. Mk 10:45) and destiny (cf. Mk 10:38).

After Jesus' first passion prediction Mark makes an important remark: 'And he said this plainly' (*kai parrēsia ton logon elalei*). The word *parrēsia* is used here in the dative case with adverbial meaning: 'openly', or better in all openness', that is, 'without any reserve', 'not in veiled language' as Jesus had done before. Here Mark allows Jesus to make the first passion prediction as an open one and he attaches crucial importance to the teaching of 8:31. Even in the private discourses with the disciples Jesus had never spoken as clearly about his mission and destiny as he did on this occasion. From now onwards Jesus begins a long series of open teachings and revelations concerning his mission and destiny as well as those of his disciples. Jesus openly speaks 'the word' (*ton logon*). The content of the word is explicitly mentioned in 8:31: the mystery of the Way of the Son of Man — his suffering, death and resurrection. From now onwards this becomes the object of 'the word', that is, of the Gospel message. This is 'the word' (*ho logos*) over which the hearers must not be 'scandalized' (cf. Mk 4:17) and on account of which they have to undergo tribulation and persecution (cf. Mk 4:17; cf. also 8:35,38; 13:9-10).

## 2) Incomprehension of the disciples

Jesus' first open announcement of the passion is met with incomprehension on the part of the disciples, represented by Peter: 'And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him' (8:32b). This incomprehension is concerned not with the mystery of Jesus' messianic identity, but with the mystery of his messianic suffering. Although Peter's



messianic confession is quite correct, his reaction to Jesus' announcement of suffering, death and resurrection shows how little he understood what this title 'Messiah' really meant. Peter, as the spokesman of the disciples, functions here as the type of many Christians in Mark's Church who have not grasped the divine necessity of the suffering and death of the Messiah<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, it is also true to say that Peter did perceive Jesus' teaching as given in 8:31; otherwise he would not have protested; and it is probable that he understood the teaching with what it implies for his own life<sup>8</sup>. Hence Peter's incomprehension consists in his unwillingness to accept the way of suffering both for Jesus and for himself. In this sense Peter's incomprehension is not intellectual but existential<sup>9</sup>.

The phrase 'but turning and seeing his disciples' in 8:33a is most likely a Marcan addition, the purpose of which is to indicate that the following rebuke of Jesus addressed to Peter is directed not to him alone but to all the disciples who, as a whole in the person of Peter, said NO to the prediction of the suffering and dying Son of Man<sup>10</sup>. In his rebuke of Peter Jesus used the hardest words: 'Get behind me, Satan!' (8:33b). Here the term 'Satan' (*satanas*) is to be understood in its Old Testament meaning of 'an adversary', insofar as Peter stands against God's plan of salvation through suffering and the cross. The reason why Jesus rebuked Peter is given in 8:33c: 'For you are not on the side of God, but of men' (*hoti ou phroneis ta tou theou alla ta ton anthro-*

7. Cf. G. Strecker, 'The Passion and Resurrection Predictions in Mark's Gospel', *Interpretation* 22 (1968), 438.

8. Cf. A. M. Ambrozic, 'New Teaching with Power (Mk 1:27)', in *Word and Spirit. Essays in Honour of D. M. Stanley* (ed. by J. Plevnik; Willowdale, 1975), 137.

9. Cf. J. L. Mays, 'An Exposition of Mark 8:27-9:1', *Interpretation* 30 (1976), 176.

10. Cf. E. Best, 'Peter in the Gospel according to Mark', *CBQ* 40 (1978), 549; K. G. Reploh, *Markus - Lehrer der Gemeinde. Eine redaktions-geschichtliche Studie zu den Jungerperikopen des Markus-evangeliums* (SBM 9; Stuttgart 1969), 103; A. Sisti, *Marco* (terza edizione) (NVE 34; Roma, 1980), 287.

pon). The phrase *ta tou theou* (literally, 'the things of God') stands for the content revealed in 8:31: the divine necessity of the suffering, death and resurrection of the Son of Man. Peter's fault consists in this that he failed to see the will of God in the passion of Jesus and thus failed to see Jesus' mission and destiny from God's perspective.

This presentation of Peter's (and the disciples') incomprehension against the background of Jesus' teaching on the divine necessity of suffering is Mark's warning to every Christian to understand and accept Jesus as the suffering Messiah and to draw the necessary implications for his own Christian discipleship.

### **B. Jesus' teaching on suffering discipleship**

In the carefully composed central section of the Gospel (8:31-10:45) built around the three passion predictions Mark has presented a threefold pattern mounting to a climax. Three times Jesus predicts that he must suffer, die and rise again (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Each of these passion prediction is immediately followed by incomprehension on the part of the disciples either by rejecting what Jesus has announced (8:32b) or by acting in a way contrary to the path Jesus has chosen (9:33-34; 10:35-37, 41). In other words, the disciples' incomprehension takes concrete shape as fear of suffering and desire for status<sup>11</sup>. Jesus makes use of these occasions of the disciples' misunderstanding to give a correct teaching on discipleship. He categorically teaches that the discipleship of the suffering Son of Man means denying oneself, taking up one's own cross even to the extent of losing one's own life for Jesus and his Gospel message (8:34-9:1) and thus sharing in the redemptive service of Jesus (9:35-37; 10:42-45). Jesus' teaching on discipleship comes to a climax at 10:45, where Jesus is presented as a model for the disciples to follow: 'For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and

11. Cf. G. Mangatt, 'Aspects of Discipleship', *Biblehashyam* 5 (Dec. 1981), 249

to give his life as a ransom for many'<sup>12</sup>. Mk 10:45 could be seen as the portrayal of the way of Jesus who, renouncing all concern for his existence, took up the cross and sacrificed his life on it in the service of mankind; but paradoxically this death brought new life to him and to the human race<sup>13</sup>. It is this way of the Master that the disciple has been asked to follow (cf. 8:34) and it is this theme which we are going to analyse now.

### 1) The basic principle of discipleship

In Mk 3:34-9:1 Jesus sets forth his ideal of discipleship. Since Mark places this section immediately after the first passion prediction (8:31), he wants to link the way of the disciple intimately with that of his Master. Just as Jesus has chosen the way of suffering and death in order to enter the kingdom of glory, so also his disciples must walk the same way of suffering and death in order to attain glory with him.

Jesus' call to discipleship involving the cross is open to all: 'If *any man (tis)* would come after me' (8:34b). The indefinite pronoun *tis* makes the challenge to 'any man' who wants to be Jesus' follower. Then Jesus gives the basic principle of discipleship in the form of a threefold requirement. The first requirement of discipleship is self-denial: 'let him deny himself'. Self-denial is to be understood both negatively and positively. Negatively it means 'not to take oneself into account' 'to say NO to oneself', and positively it means 'to surrender oneself' and, if necessary, 'to be ready even to risk one's own life'<sup>14</sup>. It is important to note that in the saying, "let him deny *himself*", it is the person himself that is made the direct object of the action of the verb. This means that he is not merely to deny

12. 10:45a states the servant role of Jesus and 10:45b explains and interprets this role. he serves to the extent of giving his life for the redemption of all.

13. Cf. R.C. Tannehill, 'The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology' *Semeia* 16 (1979), 75-76

14. Cf. W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 3. Aufl. (THNT 2; Berlin, 1980), 226; W. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 307

something to self, but he is to deny or renounce himself<sup>15</sup>. It is opposite of self-assertion; it is to surrender oneself, to risk one's own life when faced with the threat of persecution.

The second requirement of discipleship is cross-bearing: "let him take up his cross" (8:34b). The inner attitude expressed by self-denial is to be expressed in a concrete way by carrying one's own cross. 'To carry the cross' here means that the disciple of Jesus should be ready to share the destiny of his Master even to the point of martyrdom. This saying in its Gospel context evidently evokes the picture of Jesus carrying his own cross (cf. Jn 19:17: 'he went out, *bearing his own cross*') to the place of execution. Thus Jesus' own suffering and death on the cross set the pattern for his disciples. Luke, in the parallel text, adds 'daily' to the saying on cross-bearing: 'let him take up his cross *daily*' (9:23). The Lucan addition of 'daily' does not mean that the disciple of Jesus should take upon himself a new cross each day, but that his readiness to accept the cross, even to the point of martyrdom, should be renewed everyday.

The third requirement of discipleship is the continuous following of Jesus: 'and follow me' (8:34b). The first two requirements prepare the way for this third one. The decisive actions that are taken in self-denial and cross-bearing are to be manifested in a concrete way by following Jesus with sustained fidelity. Here 'following' means not just the physical going after the historical Jesus, but a deep and personal commitment to the person of Jesus, sharing in his life and destiny.

## 2) The elaboration of the basic principle

The basic principle of discipleship that is laid down in 8:34 has been elaborated in the following four verses (8:35-38), each introduced by 'for' (*gar*), stating the personal consequences of rejecting or accepting the requirements.

15. Cf. E.P. Gould, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (ICC; Edinburg, 1896), 156



The meaning of the saying in 8:35 will become clear when it is understood in the context of persecution and therefore as a call for preparedness for martyrdom. Thus the first part of the saying, 'For whoever would save his life will lose it', means that if the disciples try to preserve or safeguard their existence by denying association with Jesus and thereby avoid martyrdom, they shall suffer the eschatological loss of their lives. The second part of the saying, 'and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it', means that, if the disciples, on the contrary, give up their earth-bound existence for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel, they shall find eschatological salvation. It is important to note here that, before applying this fundamental rule to his disciples, Jesus first followed the rule himself in a literal way. The higher and the concrete cause for which the disciples have to lose their lives is indicated in the phrase 'for my sake and the Gospel's'. The phrase 'for my sake' implies personal loyalty and absolute commitment to Jesus. It is for the sake of Jesus, that is, it is for the sake of one's personal and special relationship with Jesus that one could lose his life. Mark extends the meaning of this phrase by adding 'and the Gospel's' (*kai tou euangelion*). The word *euangelion* is primarily a noun of action and therefore it denotes the act of proclamation<sup>16</sup>. It expresses not merely the act of proclamation; it also denotes the specific content, otherwise the act of proclamation has no meaning. In Mark the content of the 'Gospel' is the crucified and risen Lord<sup>17</sup>. Hence Jesus' call to the disciples to lose their life for his sake and the Gospel's means to be ready to accept the ultimate risk of their life because of their loyalty to Jesus and because of their adherence to the Gospel, the proclamation of which could lead them even to martyrdom.

16. In three places in Mark 'the gospel' is said to be 'proclaimed' (*kerysson* in 1:14; *kerychthenai* in 13:10 and *kerychthe* in 14:9). This means that 'the gospel' is there 'to be proclaimed', ultimately to the whole world (Mk 13:10).

17. Cf. R. Schnackenburg, 'Das Evangelium' im Verständnis des ältesten Evangelisten', in *Orientierung an Jesus* (FS für J. Schmid, Hrsg.: P. Hoffmann; Freiburg, 1973), 313.

Mk 8:36-37 continues the thought of 8:35 by means of two rhetorical questions that emphasize the incomparable value of human life and therefore the supreme importance of saving it. The first question (8:36) means that it is foolish and pointless to pursue material gain by denying Jesus Christ and the Gospel and thereby to forfeit authentically human existence. The second question (8:37) means that if one forfeits his life by refusing martyrdom for Jesus' sake and for the Gospel that loss can in no way be compensated; there is no exchange (nothing in this world has enough value) by which one can buy back the life that is lost.

It is important to note that in the present Marcan context these two sayings (8:36-37) are to be understood in the light of final judgment and thus they allude to the scene of Mk 8:38, where the Son of Man pronounces his decisive word on the basis of man's attitude towards him<sup>18</sup>.

Mk 8:38 is connected with the previous sayings by 'for' (*gar*) and is also concerned with the same general theme of loyalty to Jesus in suffering. It has a special relation to 8:35 and could be seen as a second commentary on it, the first being 8:36-37. It goes back to the situation portrayed in v. 35a and carries it to its eschatological consequences, namely, what happens to the man who tries to save his life by being ashamed of Jesus and of his words in public life — 'For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' (8:38). The eschatological nature of the judgment that is implicitly contained in the previous verses (8:35-37) is now given explicit expression.

### 3) The word of promise

The negative saying in 8:38 is well balanced by the positive saying in 9:1. If 8:38 serves to warn those who choose to stand with the world in its contempt for Jesus by

18. Cf. J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus II* (EKKNT II/2; Zurich-Köln-Neukirchen, 1979), 25; R. Pesch, *Markusevangelium II*, 63

revealing the severe eschatological consequences of it, 9:1 serves to give a promise of salvation to those who choose to stand with Jesus and his message in spite of the threat from this wicked world. Mk 9:1, thus, concludes the whole passage of 8:34-9:1 with a note of assurance of glory, a glory that is to be achieved through suffering and the cross.

### C. Jesus' prophecy of the destiny of the disciples in the eschatological discourse

Mark 13 is generally known as the Eschatological Discourse and it enjoys a special place in Mark's Gospel. It is 'a great divine prophecy of the ultimate salvation of the elect after, and, indeed, through unprecedented and unspeakable suffering, trouble and disaster'<sup>19</sup>. In this sense Mark 13 is a continuation and climax of the theme of suffering discipleship presented in Mk 8:34-9:1

In the Eschatological Discourse Jesus refers to the sufferings before the end as taking place in three stages — first, their first beginnings (*archē oīdinōn*) in the form of wars, earthquakes and famines (13:7-8); secondly, their continuation in the form of persecution of the disciples (13:9-13); and thirdly their intensification and consummation at the end of the age in the great 'tribulation as has not been from the beginning of creation which God created until now, and never will be' (Mk 13:19). All these sufferings are seen as necessary in the plan of salvation: 'this *must* take place' (*dei genesthai*, Mk 13:7). It is for the sake of Jesus (cf. "for my sake" in 13:9d and "for my name's sake" in 13:13a) that the disciples must undergo sufferings and tribulations which bring salvation to those who endure them. This is announced at 13:13b: 'he who endures to the end will be saved'. This announcement of salvation becomes a reality when the Son of Man comes with great power and glory and gathers "his elect" from the four winds (13:26-27).

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19. R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St Mark* (Oxford, 1950), 48

## 1) Persecution of the disciples in the Post-Easter period

Mk 13:9-13 occupies an important place in the Eschatological Discourse insofar as it presents the challenging situation of the disciples in a post-Easter period. The true nature and hard demands of discipleship that are well delineated in Mk 8:34-9:1 find their practical application in 13:9-13 which, in the form of a prophecy, speaks of the sufferings and persecutions which the disciples have to undergo in the period between Jesus' resurrection and parousia. At the same time 13:9-13 could also be seen as reflecting the hard experiences which the early Christians have already suffered for their faith in Christ<sup>20</sup>. In other words, Mark fuses here the eschatological and missionary aspects of suffering.

The term *paradidōmi* ("to deliver up"), which occurs three times in this brief section (at vv. 9. 11. 12), reveals the central theme of the section. Mark has used this term 14 times in reference to Jesus - once in reference to Judas, betrayal (3:19), three times in the passion predictions and ten times in the passion narrative. This shows that *paradidōmi* is a key word which indicates the destiny of Jesus, his way to the cross<sup>21</sup>. By using this word three times in 13:9-13 Mark intends to associate the persecution of the disciples with the sufferings of Jesus. There is even a parallelism between the handing over of Jesus and that of the disciples: just as Jesus was handed over first to the Jewish authorities and then to the Gentiles (compare 10:33 with 14:10 and 15:1), so also his disciples will be handed over to the Jewish authorities and then to the Gentiles (cf. 13:9).

The phrase "for my sake" (13:9) gives the reason for the persecution of the disciples: it is because of their allegiance to the person and mission of Jesus that they would be persecuted by the Jewish and Gentile authorities.

20. Cf. D.E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark*, 32:347; H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCBC; London, 1976), 293; P.J. Achtemeier, *Invitation to Mark*, (New York, 1978) 185

21. Cf. K. Stock, *Boten aus dem Mit-Ihm-Sein. Das Verhältnis zwischen Jesus und den Zwölf nach Markus* (AnBib 70; Rome, 1975), 158



The persecution of the disciples is a God-given occasion for confessing their faith in Christ and 'proclaiming the Gospel both to the Jews and Gentiles and thus to all nations (13:10). The "must" (*dei*) of missionary preaching (cf. 13:10: "And the Gospel must first be preached to all nations") corresponds to the 'must' of the suffering, death and resurrection of the Son of Man in 8:31; both are essential elements in God's purpose to save mankind.

In 13:10 Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will speak through the disciples in the situation of crisis. The promised help would come as a kind of prophetic intuition or inspiration (cf. Jn 14:26; 16:13-15). However, it is not a single occasion of inspiration or intuition that Jesus had in mind, but a continuing help of the Spirit for the disciples, because the situation of persecution would be repeated over and again with the continued proclamation of the Gospel.

When the disciples are engaged in the spreading of the Gospel and when persecution arises on that account, it is understandable that family relationships would be broken and there would be betrayal within the family circle itself (Mk. 13:12). The reason for this betrayal may be fanatical hatred of the Gospel or the desire to save one's own life or even the hope to win approval and material gain from the authorities. Jesus now wants the disciples to get ready to face this kind of situation. Though they can hope to be vindicated before the tribunal of God (cf. 13:13b), they would not escape suffering and persecution, even death at the hands of their own people.

With Jesus' prediction in 13:13a, "You will be hated by all for my name's sake", the disciples are placed along with the persecuted righteous of the Old Testament and with Jesus himself. The causal phrase "for my name's sake" makes it clear again that the disciples would be hated or persecuted because of their allegiance to Jesus.

In 13:13b Jesus promises salvation to those who suffer for his sake: "But he who endures to the end will be saved". The word "endure" (*hypomenō*) is to be

understood here in the sense of remaining firm and constant in one's commitment to Christ in the face of persecution and betrayal even from one's own family members<sup>22</sup>. He who stands firm in his Christian commitment and endures despite extreme consequences will come to the eschatological salvation: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10)

## 2) The eschatological vindication of the suffering discipleship

The promise of salvation that is already hinted at 13:13b as well as 8:35b finds its perfect fulfilment on the day of the glorious coming of the Son of Man (13:24-27). It is on the day of the parousia that the sufferings and tribulations of Jesus' disciples find their ultimate answer in the form of eschatological salvation. An idea of it is presented in Mark in the Old Testament phraseology of "gathering the elect": "But in those days, after that tribulation.. they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather *his elect* from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (13:24-27).

The gathering of the elect takes place "in those days, after that tribulation". "Those days" are the 'last days' which immediately precede the end<sup>23</sup>. The preposition "after" (*meta*) in the phrase "after that tribulation" indicates that the parousia, although it arrives in connection with the "tribulation", is an event distinct from it.

According to the perspective of the New Testament, "tribulation" (*thlipsis*) 'is inseparably bound up with Christian life in this world. In Acts 14:22 we read: "...through many tribulations we *must* enter the kingdom of God" (cf. also Jn 16:33; 1 Thess 3:2-4). "Tribulation" is a broader term and includes afflictions of different kinds such as 'distress', 'calamity', 'grief', and 'persecution'. Often these

22. Cf. Hauck, *meno* etc., TDNT IV, 586; Cf. also E.P. Gould, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, 246: 'Hypomeno denotes steadfastness under trial and opposition'.

23. Cf. R. Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, II, 302

words are used together, for example, Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 6:4; 12:10.

In the New Testament, tribulation is eschatological in character, because with the suffering and death of Christ the eschatological suffering - the great tribulation - has already begun<sup>24</sup>. The phrase "after that tribulation" strikes a note of eschatological hope: when the determined period of eschatological tribulation is over, God will finally come to save his elect; and this is what we find described in Mk 13:26-27.

In 13:27 it is the Son of Man who is the subject of both the verbs, 'send out' and 'gather'. This shows that it is the Son of Man who controls the whole scene portrayed in this verse. The actions that are attributed here to the Son of Man, namely, sending out the angels and gathering the elect, are all actions which are attributed to God in the Old Testament. The fact that the Son of Man sends out angels shows the divine status, authority and power of the Son of Man.

Unlike in Matthew (24:31), in Mark it is the Son of Man who "will gather" (*episynaxei*) the elect. The term *episynaxei* conveys the thought that the elect will be gathered at a central rallying point, namely, around the Son of Man<sup>25</sup>. The gathering is restricted to 'his elect' (*tous eklektous autou*). "His" (*autou*) asserts the choice and ownership of the Son of Man over the elect (cf. 13:20; "for the sake of the elect, whom he chose").

"The elect" of the Son of Man are not just the lucky ones, but those who have taken seriously the call he makes to *all* men (cf. Mk 8:34). In this sense the call itself is not a call to safety and security but to suffering and tribulation. Hence, when Mark used the term "elect", he might have thought of the faithful disciples of Jesus who really shared in the destiny of their Master and persevered in their

24. Cf. H. Schlier, *thlibo*, TDNT III, 146

25. Cf. D. E. Hiebert *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago, 1974) 328; W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 477

sufferings and tribulations till the end (cf. 13:13b). In other words, in the general context of chapter 13, *the elect* are those who were delivered up to councils and were beaten in synagogues; who have borne witness to Jesus before governors and kings; who have preached the gospel to all nations; who have been persecuted and hated by all; who have endured to the end<sup>26</sup>. Here we have to remember that there is an inter-relationship between 'the elect' of 13:27 and those of vv. 20 and 22. What is being said about the glorious destiny of "the elect" in v. 27 has already been prepared for in the assurances given in vv. 20 and 22. These assurances and the promise already made in v. 13b find their perfect fulfilment in the eschatological gathering of the elect in v. 27.

The act of gathering the elect implies not only their bodily resurrection but also their glorification. This glorification of the elect is the final vindication of the suffering and persecution which they have endured till the end for the sake of their allegiance to the person and mission of Jesus. Thus the faithful disciples ("the elect") who shared the suffering of Jesus will finally share the glory of their Master and Lord on the day of his parousia.

## Conclusion

From this analysis it becomes clear that Mark takes every effort to present Jesus as the supreme example to his disciples and to reaffirm his way of suffering and the cross as the authentic Christian way. It was not in miraculous deeds that Jesus revealed his full identity but on the cross. Only faith can recognize and accept that it is the 'crucified One' who is 'the Son of God'. This is the significance of the centurion's confession at the foot of the cross (cf. 15:39); he becomes for Mark a symbolic figure for all believers. He was not offended by the lowliness and sufferings of Jesus, but rather he found his faith's real depth in them. As we have already mentioned, suffering and cross have

26. Cf. C.B. Cousar; 'Eschatology and Mark's Theologia Crucis. A Critical Analysis of Mk 13', *Interpretation* 24 (1970), 324.



become an integral part of Jesus' person and mission. Even the risen Jesus does not cease to be the "crucified one". This is what we find in the announcement of the angel in 16:6: "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified (literally, *who has been crucified*). He has risen". This means that even after the resurrection it is only in the light of the cross that one can truly understand who Jesus is. This has an implied message for discipleship: it is only in the light of suffering and the cross that we can understand what it means to be the disciple of this crucified and risen Lord. In this way it is the mystery of Jesus' person and destiny that gives discipleship its meaning and orientation and it is in Jesus that the disciples have to see their ideal pattern — the pattern of suffering leading into final victory.

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## **‘When I am Weak, then I am Strong’ (2 Cor 12:10): Pauline Understanding of Apostolic Sufferings**

Describing the encounters Paul had with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus and the subsequent events, Luke the author of the Acts presents Paul as specially appointed by Christ to make his name known to the Gentiles and Kings and to the people of Israel. In this mission he also would have to suffer very much for the sake of Christ (cf. Acts 9:15-16). The implied idea in this close relationship between mission and suffering is that only through suffering for the sake of Christ could Paul's mission be a meaningful reality and a success. In fact, as we read the Pauline writings it is precisely this fact that we come to realize. What Luke has described in the Acts about the hardship and sufferings Paul had to undergo in his apostolic career beginning in Damascus and concluding in Rome, Paul himself analysed and personalized in his writings, giving us a sublime picture of how he became the great apostle and theologian he was not in spite of his sufferings, but because of and through his many sufferings. The present study is an attempt to analyse the specific aspects of this apostolic sufferings in the ministry of Paul.

### **Radical option for the suffering Christ**

Paul wrote his most personal letter to the Philippians. The Philippians had been very generous to Paul, especially when he was spending his time in prison. It was the first Church that Paul had established on European soil, in the Roman province of Macedonia. The letter was written at a time when he was troubled by the opposition

of other Christian workers towards him and was distressed by false teaching in the church at Philippi. There were some Christian missionaries who were happy about Paul being in prison so that they could also reveal their abilities and zeal to preach the Gospel and thus make Paul realize that he was not so unique and indispensable (Phil 1:13-19). There were others who were bent on preaching a Gospel of circumcision, a problem that was officially solved during the Jerusalem Council<sup>1</sup>, but which still continued to disturb the Christian communities in Galatia and other places. Judaization, as this attempt was called, was for Paul not a mere question of social practice. Rather it meant for him the admission of a different principle of salvation based on human achievement. It was through the hard efforts of Stephen and Philip that the sectarian approach of Christianity was counteracted and the church was liberated from the framework of Jewish identity. The discussions held in Jerusalem after the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-14:28) established beyond doubt that the Gospel is to be preached to all, the response to which was only faith in Jesus Christ. But once again Paul had to encounter the problem in his communities. This made Paul analyse where the problem had its roots and it is what Paul has written in the form of an autobiography in Phil 3:5-14.

Here Paul explains how he himself was one totally committed to the all-sufficiency of Judaism by his excellence and zeal. But his encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus created in him a new value system and consequently he chose a way of suffering and sacrifice for the sake of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. It was a programme of life Paul fixed for his future and wrote: 'All I want is to know Christ and to experience the

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1. Cf. Act 15:1-34 and Gal 2:1-10. It is to be noted that Acts 15:1-34 is a conflation of two events, of which only Acts 15:1-12 is the council discussion, given by Paul in a different manner in Gal 2:1-10. Acts 15:3-34 deals with a later decision taken under the leadership of James, a decision about which Paul heard only when he reached Jerusalem many years later (cf. Acts 21:17-25).

power of his resurrection, to share his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life' (Phil 3:10-11). For Paul it was a process which meant a radical option for the suffering Christ and a continuous commitment to the cause he had taken upon himself. For many, it was a question of a compromised Christianity through which they wanted to be spared the suffering dimension of Christian life. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, the Judaizers had recourse to circumcising the Gentile Christians only 'so that they (the Judaizers) may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ' (Gal 6:12). He knew very well that those preachers did not obey the Law at all (Gal 6:15). Paul, however, chose the way of the cross and he walked through it with conviction and determination.

### **Paul and the early Church**

Paul had to play a very decisive role in the early Church after his Damascus experience, an experience through which Paul understood the soteriological value of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a Jew, Paul knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, had been "hung on a tree" and hence had been "cursed" in the sense of Dt 21:23. This was undoubtedly the main reason why as a Pharisee he could not accept Jesus as the Messiah. He was, for Paul, a "stumbling block" (1 Cor 1:23), one 'cursed' by the very law which he so zealously observed. But the revelation near Damascus impressed him emphatically with the soteriological value of the death of Jesus of Nazareth in way that he never suspected before. With a logic that only a rabbi could appreciate, Paul saw Christ Jesus taking upon himself the curse of the Law and transforming it into its opposite, so that he became a means of freeing man from its malediction.

After his conversion Paul went to Arabia (Gal 1:17), probably a Nabatean kingdom in Transjordan. The purpose of this withdrawal is unknown; for some, Paul withdrew in solitude and meditation to prepare himself for his future ministry; for others, he journeyed in pilgrimage to Mount



Sinai, to the mountain of the Law, before he could declare it abrogated. In any case, his sojourn was short, and this is probably the reason why Luke omits it. After his return from Arabia in AD 37, Paul spent about three years in Damascus (cf. Gal 1:21; Acts 9:23), preaching the Gospel and establishing that Jesus was the Messiah. But Jewish opposition, supported by King Aretas (2 Cor 11:32), made Paul leave the city. His flight was arranged by his disciples, who lowered him over the city wall in a basket (Acts 9:25).

Reaching Jerusalem, for the first time after his conversion (Acts 9:26; Gal 1:18) around AD 40, Paul had to face the suspicion of the apostles and the other believers there. Barnabas was there to allay the fear of the Christians about Paul (Acts 9:27) and Paul was finally accepted by them. The purpose of this visit of Paul according to Gal 1:18 was to obtain information from Cephas about preaching the Gospel. It was during this visit that Paul had a vision while praying in the Temple, that he should leave Jerusalem and get ready to go to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17-21). When the Hellenistic Jews tried to kill him, the believers took Paul to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus (Acts 9:30; Gal 1:21). It is probable that Paul remained at Tarsus from AD 40 to 44, though nothing is known of his activities during the period. It may have been a period of intense reflection on his whole life and his future mission. It may also have been a time when Paul had to get ready for his future struggles. It is probably during this time of recollection that Paul had the vision referred to in 2 Cor 12:2-4, a vision in which he heard things which cannot be put into words, things that human lips may not speak. The Risen Lord gave him the assurance that he would at last reap the fruit of his sacrifice. At the end of his stay in Tarsus Barnabas took him to Antioch, where he stayed for a year and preached the Gospel (cf. Acts 11:25-28).

### **Taking the Gospel to the Gentiles**

The most active and committed period of Paul's life as a missionary was between AD 46 and 58, a time when

he preached the Gospel in Asia Minor and Greece. According to Acts 13:1-3 it was the Holy Spirit who took the initiative for this mission, while the community fasted, prayed and sent Barnabas, Paul and John Mark, the relative of Barnabas (Col 4:10), to far off missions. Philip, one of the servants of the table, had preached the Gospel to the Ethiopian official (Acts 8:26-39) and Peter had received Cornelius into the Church as the result of a divine compulsion (Acts 10:1-11:18). From now on preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles became the normal activity of the Church of Antioch. However, it was after the total rejection of the Gospel by the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia that the missionaries decided to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-48).

The Acts of the Apostles recounts three missionary journeys of Paul<sup>2</sup>. Though Barnabas was the leader of the first missionary journey, the events which followed revealed that Paul emerged as the important person. Towards the end of the preaching it became clear that the church had to accept in principle the fact of it being a community consisting of Jewish and Gentile Christians. This new dimension of the Church initiated by Stephen now became a crucial issue, and Paul had to take a strong stand in this matter. As said earlier, Paul went to Jerusalem with Barnabas and convinced the Jerusalem leaders that the Gospel was to be preached to all and that faith in Christ was the only requirement for anyone to become a Christian (Gal 2:1-10). Though the problem of the admission of the Gentiles into the Church was theoretically solved in the Jerusalem discussion, there were many more problems coming up in which Paul had to take a lead and prove his courageous and uncompromising stand. One of them was the "Antioch Incident" which happened after the Jerusalem Council. Some Christians from Jerusalem with strong Pharisaic leanings went to Antioch and started cri-

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2. First missionary journey (13:3,14:26) AD 46-49; Second missionary journey (15:40-18:22) AD 49-52; third missionary journey (Acts 18:23; 21:17) AD 54-57).

ticising Peter who was there at that time, for eating with Gentile Christians. Peter yielded to their criticism and drew back from the Gentile converts, and this action of Peter led many other Jewish Christians, even Barnabas, to do the same. Since Peter was their recognized leader, Paul found it necessary to protest and correct Peter, and so he "opposed him to his face" (Gal 2:11). He told Peter that he was violating the accepted principles of the Jerusalem Council and was not "walking straight according to the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:13). It may not have been anything easy for him to do so, realizing the inconveniences that would ensue from it for himself. But he never opted for opportunism and cheap popularity.

Paul's second and third missionary journeys (AD 49-57) were characterized by his total and radical commitment to the cause he had taken upon himself. His mission in Northern Greece was a success; but he was opposed by the Jews of Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9) and Paul had to leave for Southern Greece. His bitter feelings for the Jews of Thessalonica are reflected in 1 Thes 2:14-16. Though he tried to present the gospel to the elites of Athens in a philosophical way (Acts 17:22-32) it met with failure. After this disappointment Paul went to Corinth, which was, on the one hand, a very important commercial centre of the Mediterranean world, but, on the other hand, a risky place for the gospel to be preached. He refers to his anxiety and fear as he went there: "When I came to you to preach God's secret truth, I did not use big words and great learning. For while I was with you, I made up my mind to forget everything except Jesus Christ and especially his death on the cross. So when I came to you, I was weak and trembled all over with fear, and my teaching and message were not delivered with skilful words of human wisdom, but with convincing proof of the power of God's Spirit" (1 Cor 2:1-4).

During his third missionary journey, when he spent more than two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:10), Paul was informed about a new problem in the Churches of Galatia, which he had founded during his second missionary

journey (Acts 16:6). Certain judaizing teachers had infiltrated the churches there declaring that in addition to having faith in Christ, a Christian was obliged to keep the Mosaic Law as well, beginning with the rite of circumcision. To Paul it was a false gospel, a doctrine diametrically opposed to the one which was solemnly accepted in the Jerusalem Council. Hence this was a serious matter for him. He maintained that a man became acceptable to God only through faith in Christ and not through any performance of human device. He had to demonstrate how the entire process of salvation history beginning with Abraham was inaugurated through faith, and the Law was only an interim arrangement till the realization of the promise took place in Christ (Gal 3:6-29).

### **Apostolate and creative suffering**

When Paul embraced Christianity and became a follower of Christ, he was under the impression that the Church, of which he became a member, would be a community characterized by a new outlook on Judaism and its practices. But it was not so. The Christian community of Jerusalem was a very sectarian one with its own vision almost identified with the beliefs and practices of Judaism. They had taken Christianity as another sect of Judaism, like the sect of the Sadducees (cf Acts 5:17). This is reflected in the accusation against Paul by the Jews that he was a leader of the sect of the Nazarenes (Acts 24:5), a sect that was spoken against by people everywhere (Acts 28:22). But for Paul, Christianity was not a sect, it was the way<sup>3</sup>, a way of life. According to him, Christianity was something which transcended Judaism, because the very attitude of Jesus of Nazareth to Judaism was that and the way he accomplished his salvific work was against the principles of salvation maintained by Judaism. The continuous controversy and discussion Paul had to carry on in Antioch and Jerusalem and the crises he had to face

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3. Luke has taken special care to establish that Christianity is a way of life which he proposes as 'the Way' (*he hodos*) Cf. Acts 9:2; 24:14-16; 22:4



in the churches he had founded were all characterized by this basic misunderstanding about the true identity of the religious movement inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth. But for Paul Christianity would have remained a sect of Judaism and Paul had to fight hard and suffer very much to define and establish the identity and nature of Christianity.

Once Paul realized that Jesus of Nazareth was alive and that he was one with the believers, an experience he had in the Damascus event, he was ready to give up everything he had to gain a deeper knowledge of Christ. He also expected that his Jewish brethren would also follow his example. But when he started preaching the Gospel to them, they were not willing to accept it. Moreover, they tried to persecute him, wherever he preached the Gospel. It remained a source of pain and agony for Paul that his Jewish brethren were not willing to believe in Christ. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians he expressed his hope that "when they turn to the Lord, the veil covering their face would be removed" (2 Cor 3:14-17). It was in the Letter to the Romans that Paul gave a detailed analysis of the problem of the Jews who did not believe (Rom 9:11). His words of profound feelings and agony reveal the pain he underwent: "I am speaking the truth; I belong to Christ and I do not lie. My conscience, ruled by the Holy Spirit, also assures me that I am not lying, when I say how great is my sorrow, how endless the pain in my heart for my people, my own flesh and blood! For their sake I could wish that I myself were under God's curse and separated from Christ" (Rom 9:1-3).

The greatest sufferings Paul had to undergo during his apostolic ministry was from the community of Corinth. As explained above, his preaching to the Corinthians was an experiment and a risk in so far as it was not the ideal place to go and preach the gospel of right living. Disappointed by the Athenian adventure of preaching the gospel in the context of the search for wisdom characteristic of the Greek mind, Paul changed his entire approach and gave a new thrust to his preaching by confronting the common and the ordinary, who from their ethical and social standpoint

were below the average. That could be the reason why Paul remained with the Corinthians for 18 months, precisely in order to guide them in their new way of life. But the more Paul took interest in them and tried to bring them up to Christian maturity, the more he had to suffer from them on various grounds.

Paul had to write several letters to the Corinthians in the process of making it a mature community<sup>4</sup>. Doubts, factions, scandals, opposition to Paul and questioning his authority, all formed the general situation of the Corinthian Church. As years passed by, Paul's relations with the faction-torn church of Corinth worsened. Paul paid a hasty visit to Corinth (cf 2 Cor 12:14; 13:1-2), which he called a painful visit (2 Cor 12:21) and it accomplished nothing. Returning to Ephesus Paul wrote another letter to them, a letter composed 'with many tears' (2 Cor 2:3-4; 7:8-12), after which he sent Titus to visit the Corinthians in an attempt to smooth out the situation. Later when Titus brought him the consoling news that a reconciliation between him and the Corinthians had been effected, from Macedonia Paul wrote a fourth letter, known as the 2 Corinthians, a letter in which Paul analysed the various aspects of his personality as an apostle and disciple of Christ. It is a letter which enables us to have a look into the profound meaning of being an apostle surrounded by sufferings and misunderstandings, at the same time having a sincere and dedicated personality.

'Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God', it is in these words that Paul qualified the nature of his relationship to the Corinthian community. Hence he was ready to undergo any amount of sufferings, both mental and physical, for the cause he had taken upon himself to preach the Gospel. He wrote: 'God in his mercy has given us this work to do, and so

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4. It is probable that Paul wrote at least four letters to the Corinthians, of which we now possess the second and the fourth, the others being referred to in 1 Cor 5:9 and 2 Cor 2:3-4.

we are not discouraged. We put aside all secret and shameful deeds; we do not act with deceit, nor do we falsify the Word of God. In the full light of truth we live in God's sight and try to commend ourselves to everybody's good conscience' (2 Cor 4:1-2).

Paul was aware of his having the treasure of apostleship in common clay pots and this fact made it clear for him that this is for demonstrating the source of this as derived from the power of God and not from any human source. In particular, Paul had to get reconciled with a 'thorn in his flesh' which was acting as a messenger of Satan to beat him and keep him from being proud. He prayed to the Lord three times about this, asking him to take it away. But the Lord's answer was: 'My grace is all you need, for my power is strongest, when you are weak' (2 Cor 12:9). What Paul did was to accept it as a new way of life and a new approach to the fact of sufferings and limitations, and concluded: 'When I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10). The reason for this was his another conviction: 'I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me' (Phil 4:13).

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul allows us to have an idea about the series of sufferings he had to undergo: Five times I was given thirtynine lashes by the Jews; three times I was whipped by the Romans; and once I was stoned. I have been in three shipwrecks, and once I spent twentyfour hours in water. In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from fellow-Jews and from Gentiles. There have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends. There have been work and toil; often I have been without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter, or clothing. And not to mention other things, everyday I am under the pressure of my concern for all the Churches. When some one is weak, then I feel weak too; when someone is led into sin, I am filled with distress' (2 Cor 11:24-29). Only a sincere person totally dedicated to his ministry could write like this and prove



beyond doubt that he had a different approach to sufferings. He never complained about his sufferings; he knew fully well that it was through those sufferings that he could grow. That is why he wrote: 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies' (2 Cor 4:8-10). For Paul it was a question of his outer nature wasting away so that his inner nature could be renewed every day (cf. 2 Cor 4:16).

Paul knew well that when the perishable body was torn down, God will prepare a house in heaven for him to live in, a home he himself has made which will last for ever. Until it took place he had to sigh and groan here below with a feeling of oppression. The idea is not that of alienated existence corresponding to the Platonic thinking, rather the heavenly one transforming the earthly one (2 Cor 5:1-5), namely, the Spirit of the risen Christ gradually changing us into his likeness in an ever greater degree of glory (2 Cor 3:18). It is about this gradual transformation of the children and the material creation that Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, Paul's attitude to suffering was not one of resignation. He knew well that he had a task to take care of and his sufferings were the context in which he had to carry out his mission. To the Philippians he wrote from prison: 'My deep desire and hope is that I will never fail in my duty' but that at all times, and especially just now, I shall be full of courage, so that with my whole being I shall bring honour to Christ, whether I live or die. For what is life? To me it is Christ. Death, then, will bring more. But if by continuing to live I can do more worthwhile work, then I am not sure, which I should choose. I am pulled in two directions. I want very much to leave this life and be with Christ, which is a far better thing; but for your sake it is much more important that I remain alive' (Phil 1:20-24). This conscious and creative approach to hardships and sufferings enabled Paul to make

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rom 8:19-25; Cf. J. Pathrapankal. *Christian Life: New Testament Perspectives*, Bangalore, 1982, pp 26-30.



his commitment deeper and his services to the communities more personal. Hence the theme of joy in suffering predominates his entire Letter to the Philippians. That is why he could write to the Colossians: 'Now I am happy about my sufferings for you, for means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, the Church' (1 Cor 1:24)

Pauline understanding of apostolic suffering is an important element of the Christian approach to the reality of suffering. Paul makes it abundantly clear that there is no better way to authentic Christian life other than through suffering. It was this he saw realized in the person of Christ and it was also the same he experienced in his own life after his encounter with the Risen Lord. Moreover, he had to plan his ministry in the early Church in such a way that he had to integrate suffering as part of his call. As such, there was the possibility for him to opt for a less committed life; but he would not accept it. For him the call he received was serious enough; the mission he had to fulfil was challenging enough. Hence he would not count the cost; rather he would welcome any suffering as part of his ministry. He knew only too well that he was growing through the crises he underwent and thereby he could experience the real beauty and challenge of being a follower of Christ. What we read in the second Letter to Timothy as written by Paul is a fitting conclusion of what Paul could say at the end of his life; 'As for me, the hour has come to be sacrificed; the time is here for me to leave this life. I have done my best in the race; I have run the full distance, and I have kept my faith. And now there is waiting for me the prize of victory awarded for a righteous life, the prize which the Lord, the righteous Judge will give me on that Day' (2 Tim 4:6-8). That is why he could also say: 'I am still full of confidence, because I know in whom I have trusted, and I am sure that he is able to keep safe until that Day what he has entrusted to me' (2 Tim 1:12).

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